

The Parables Of Jesus

The 2000

POWER



Lectures

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Dedication

Though every member of the body of Christ is special, the plain truth is that certain members of the church find a special place in our hearts that can never be adequately described. Such is certainly the case regarding the two men to whom this year's lectureship volume is dedicated. These two men contributed so much to the work of the Southaven church of Christ, and they brought so much joy to our hearts. In fact, the keenly developed senses of humor possessed by these two men brought countless smiles to our lips and laughs to our hearts. Unfortunately for us, both men were taken from us far more swiftly than any of us could have imagined.

At the end of January of this year, Ben Brents, a beloved brother in Christ, and deacon in this congregation, suffered a heart attack. No one saw it coming. Tests were conducted and surgery was performed. However, complications arose after the surgery. Ben continued to battle, but then suffered two more serious heart attacks. Even so, he fought like a champion until he finally "crossed the Jordan" on the evening of February 15, 2000.

Ben was a unique individual. He and his dear wife, June, were instrumental in many different areas of the work of the church. They devoted themselves unselfishly to the "We Care" program of the church, a program designed for the older members of the congregation. I can say without hesitation that no one worked any more vigorously in their assigned area of duty than did Ben Brents, and his helpmeet, June.

Ben also distinguished himself as someone that loved the truth. He wanted to hear the Bible and the Bible alone. He was proud to be a member of the Lord's church, especially the Southaven church of Christ. And we were especially proud to have him!

James Gahagan was equally precious to us here at Southaven. Like a flower plucked too soon, he was taken from us just a week prior to the writing of these words. On June 12th, 2000, he was killed in a truck accident. Within minutes, the congregation was reeling with news that still seems nightmarish even to contemplate. Most importantly, his sweet wife Charlotte, his two precious children, Michael and Audra, and his wonderful mother, Alma, are deprived of the daily presence of someone so very special. We hurt for them and pray for them. They are so dear!

Additionally, the church family grieves because a loved and cherished brother will no longer grace us with his presence. No longer will we see his wry smile, or be on the receiving end of one of his teasing remarks. James served as a coordinator of the Faith-In-Action program and, at the time of his death, was serving as the church treasurer. His work will be missed!

Indeed, Ben Brents and James Gahagan were very special men, men who made a difference in the lives of everyone who was privileged to know them. Therefore, it is with the utmost appreciation and indebtedness that this year's annual lectureship volume is dedicated to the memory of Ben Brents and James Gahagan. "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints" (Psm. 116:15).



Ben Brents



James Gahagan

Acknowledgments

It has often been said that if you see a turtle sitting on top of a fencepost, you know he didn't get there by himself! Similarly, I know that whatever heights the work in this volume may rise to, I didn't produce it by myself!

In the first place, gratitude is expressed to the elders of the Southaven church of Christ (Larry Everson, Bill Pierce, and Coleman Simpson) for their vision and willingness to conduct the annual POWER lectureship. It is a genuine joy and thrill to work under the oversight of these men. Those who know them best would tell you in a heartbeat that these men have the noble goal of uplifting Christ, His Word and His church.

In the second place, I wish to thank the 35 different gospel preachers who assisted me in authoring manuscripts for the book. It is encouraging to know that their work is going to bless many Bible students for many, many years.

In the third place, I wish to express my deepest and heartfelt gratitude to Robin Smith for his invaluable assistance in preparing this volume for publication. Robin was involved in so many aspects of producing this book that I scarcely know where to begin to thank him. From the initial proofing of the manuscripts to the final typesetting, Robin's fingerprints are, and always will be, all over this book. We are justifiably proud of this bright, and energetic young man.

Also, I wish to thank Shannon Vawter, and my lovely wife, Tish, for last minute assistance on the book.

Finally, thanks to Geraldine Chaney, whose secretarial excellence has made it possible for me to concentrate on the book when I needed to. She is still the best church secretary I know. Thanks also to Sain Publications for a job well done!

--B. J. Clarke

Foreword

Some of the most famous stories ever told are included in the volume you hold in your hand. But, of course, the stories in this book are not of the “Goldilocks and The Three Bears” variety. In fact, the stories in this book are not just earthly stories. Rather, they are, as we often put it, “earthly stories with a heavenly meaning.” They are the parables of Jesus Christ.

That the parables deserve special emphasis and attention is surely evidenced by the fact that approximately one-third of our Lord’s recorded teaching was done in parabolic form. Surely, any form of teaching employed by the Master Teacher is worthy of serious investigation.

We have endeavored, in this volume, to include all of the parables spoken by Jesus. However, we readily recognize that there is some difference of opinion as to the precise number of parables told by Jesus. For instance, some do not consider the story Jesus told about the two builders (Matt. 7:24-27), while it is our conviction that it possesses sufficient characteristics to qualify as parabolic. On the other hand, some would include the story of the rich man and Lazarus on their list of parables. We deal with that story in this volume, but we do so under the title “The ‘Parable’ That Is Not A Parable.” Reasons for our decision are explained in that chapter.

Be that as it may, we do believe that every chapter in this book has something valuable to offer in a study of the parables of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The first chapter provides a general introduction of the parables. Also, in almost every chapter, the authors introduce their material with a brief overview of the value of parables. May God bless us all in the reading of this volume!

--B. J. Clarke

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CHAPTER 1

Pondering The Parables

Keith Cozort

Introduction

WHEN SOMEONE MENTIONS THE word “parable,” people who are familiar with the Scriptures automatically think of Jesus Christ, the Master Teacher. Our Lord’s use of parables is unequaled by any other inspired or uninspired writer, or orator. It is my responsibility to introduce us to this year’s theme: **The Parables of Jesus Christ**. I will attempt to do so by examining the following areas: 1) Parable Defined; 2) Parable Contrasted; 3) Parable Use Before Jesus; 4) Parable Use By Jesus; 5) Parable Interpretation; and 6) Parable Impact.

Parable Defined

In the Old Testament, the term translated “parable” is the Hebrew word **mashal**. This word is translated by both English words “parable” and “proverb.” It is defined as:

a comparison, similitude, parable; a sentiment, maxim; a proverb, by-word, satire...to utter a proverb: with the idea of speaking with authority, so as to command reverence; hence the meaning of parable or proverb.¹

Essentially there was little distinction placed between a “parable” and a “proverb” in Old Testament usage.

In the New Testament, the word “parable” is a transliteration of the Greek word **parabole**. Transliteration is taking the original letters and giving them an English equivalent, thus making a brand new word in English. This Greek verb is defined as:

a placing beside (akin to **paraballo**, to throw or lay beside, to compare). It signifies a placing of one thing beside another with a view of comparison...It is generally used of a somewhat lengthy utterance or narrative drawn from nature or human circumstances, the object of which is to set forth a spiritual lesson.²

Another description of a parable is:

specifically a narrative, fictitious but agreeable to the laws and usages of human life, by which either the duties of men or the things of God, particularly the nature and history of God's kingdom, are figuratively portrayed.³

As a child I was taught to remember a parable as “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.” This is a rather simplistic definition but it is essentially correct.

Parable Contrasted

Jesus used various types of speech (simile, metaphor, allegory, etc.) when teaching and preaching in the first century. Though some of these figures of speech are similar to parables, they are generally distinguished from our understanding of a parable today.

A parable is different from a **simile**. A simile is defined as “an explicit comparison between two things that are essentially unlike each other and that are introduced by a connective such as ‘like,’ ‘as,’ or ‘than,’ or by a verb such as ‘seems.’”⁴

Jesus used similes often. Some examples would include:

Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves (Matt. 10:16).

For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (12:40).

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness (23:27).

A parable is distinguished from a **metaphor**. The metaphor is similar to the simile in that there is a comparison between two different things, but, while the simile is an "explicit comparison," the metaphor is an "implied comparison." Some examples of Jesus' use of metaphors would include: "Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men" (Matt. 5:13). Another example would be: "Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, and of the leaven of Herod" (Mark 8:15). The comparison is not explicitly stated but it is implied.

Parables are also different from **fables**. Fables are stories that could not actually have occurred. They major in impossible occurrences such as animals who talk to humans [the only exceptions being the serpent talking to Eve in the garden (Gen. 3:1-5) and Balaam's ass talking to Balaam (Num. 22:28-30)], trees or plants that orally proclaim a message, etc. D. R. Dungan states concerning the comparison between a fable and a parable:

Like a parable it is put into a form of a story; but unlike the parable, its actors are unreal,

while the parable is made from the actual occurrences of life, and no one is made to act a fictitious part.⁵

An example of a fable was stated by Jotham to the men of Shechem (Judg. 9:7-15). Jotham speaks of the trees going forth and calling for the olive tree, the fig tree, and the vine to reign over them. Each declined the request to rule over the trees. Finally, the trees came to the bramble, and it placed a condition upon the trees before accepting the opportunity to rule over them. Another example is that of king Jehoash, of Israel, sending a fable to king Amaziah, of Judah. The fable stated:

The thistle that was in Lebanon sent to the cedar that was in Lebanon, saying, Give thy daughter to my son to wife: and there passed by a wild beast that was in Lebanon, and trode down the thistle (2 Kings 14:9).

A parable is not the same thing as an **allegory**. In an allegory essentially every detail of the story has meaning: "In an allegory, a number of significant parallels between the story and spiritual truth are intended. In the case of a parable, it is not legitimate to treat each detail as having a spiritual application."⁶

Jesus used allegories in His preaching and teaching, as well as parables. He said, "I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life" (John 8:12). Another example of an allegory would be: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, I am the door of the sheep" (10:7). Jesus was not actually a light or a door, but He is using an allegory to make His comparison.

Brother H. Leo Boles made the following distinction between the parable and the allegory:

A parable differs from an "allegory" in that the allegory, with its direct personification of ideas

or attributes, involves really no comparison. The allegory is self-interpreting; the parable demands attention, insight, sometimes an actual explanation.⁷

With the exception of a fable, our Lord used all of these figures of speech (simile, metaphor, allegory) during His earthly ministry, but they were not as prevalent in His preaching and teaching as were parables.

Parable Use Before Jesus

It is often the case, due to the abundance of parables spoken by our Lord, that people assume Jesus was the first to use parables for teaching or for making comparisons. Such is not the case. The Jews were familiar with parables and their usage even before the time of Christ. We have various examples of parables being used, and used effectively, in the Old Testament. A couple of examples are in order.

A prophet of God waited along the road for Ahab, the king of Israel, to pass that way (1 Kings 20:35-43). He had disguised himself by putting ashes on his face. When king Ahab passed, the prophet called out to him and told his story, a parable, of having been given a prisoner during battle to watch. He was told that if the prisoner escaped, it would cost his own life, or he would have to pay a talent of silver. The prophet then says he was busy “here and there” and before he knew it the prisoner was gone (20:40). King Ahab states that the disguised prophet’s fate has already been decided by his acceptance of the responsibility and the terms of caring for the prisoner.

The prophet of God then washes his face, thus making himself known to the king, and states that king Ahab has allowed Ben-hadad, the king of Syria, to go free when God had already appointed his utter destruction. As a result, God says, “thy life shall go for his life, and thy people for

his people” (20:42). King Ahab realized the importance of the parable and went to his home displeased and heavyhearted.

The parable which is most widely remembered from the Old Testament is the one Nathan told to king David (2 Sam. 12). This parable dealt with two men who lived in the same city. One was extremely wealthy and the other man had very little to his name, except for one little ewe lamb. One day the wealthy man had a visitor who came to stay at his house and the wealthy man took the one ewe lamb of the poor man in order to provide his visitor a meal to eat. King David’s “anger was greatly kindled against the man” (12:5). David called for the man to be put to death because of his insensitivity and for taking the only thing the poor man possessed. He ordered the man to restore to his poor neighbor four times the amount he had stolen. It was then that the prophet Nathan said to king David, “Thou art the man” (12:7).

It was king David, the wealthy man, who had stolen the ewe lamb, Bathsheba, from his poor neighbor, Uriah the Hittite (ch. 11). David had robbed his faithful soldier Uriah of his only possession, his wife.

The parable which Nathan the prophet told to king David was very effective. King David, upon hearing the story, pronounced the correct verdict for the wealthy thief. He did not realize at the time, though, he was pronouncing judgment against himself.

Thus, parables were familiar parts of speech to the Jews even before our Lord started using them in the first century.

Parable Use By Jesus

Our Lord made great use of parables during His earthly ministry. It has been calculated that Jesus’ use of parables equaled about one-third of His total recorded

verbal teaching. This was a considerable amount of teaching when you realize that Jesus used very few parables in His teaching until about the second year of His ministry. It was at this time when many of the Jews, the scribes and Pharisees in particular, had already rejected His teachings. So Christ started using parables extensively in His preaching and teaching.

In Matthew chapter thirteen, some seven parables of our Lord are given. They were seemingly spoken in succession, one right after another. The disciples inquired privately as to why Jesus was using parables in His teaching of the people (Matt. 13:10). They may have been referring more to the number of parables than just His use of them. Our Lord gave a twofold answer to their question. First, Jesus said He was using the parables to reveal the truth to those inquiring minds who desired to know more about the kingdom of heaven (13:10-17). Jesus was able to use these stories of real life situations among the Jews to teach spiritual lessons concerning the coming kingdom. Second, Jesus used the parables to conceal the truth from those who were not really interested in learning about the kingdom of heaven (13:11, 15). These lessons were not revealed to these individuals because, as Isaiah had prophesied:

this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them (13:15).

It was not that Jesus did not want them to know the truth concerning the kingdom of God. The problem was with the people themselves. They had closed their own ears and shut their own eyes and would not allow themselves to

learn more about the coming kingdom. They were like many today who say, “Don’t bother giving me the facts; my mind is made up.”

Is it any wonder that we read, “when the chief priests and Pharisees had heard his parables, they perceived that he spake of them” (21:45)? Luke also informs us, “And the chief priests and the scribes the same hour sought to lay hands on him; and they feared the people: for they perceived that he had spoken this parable against them” (Luke 20:19). The chief priests, scribes, and Pharisees were sure Jesus was referring to them in these parables, but they did not understand the message because of closing their own ears and shutting their eyes, thereby making it impossible for them to understand.

A third reason why Jesus taught with so many parables was in order to fulfill Old Testament prophecy. The psalmist stated, “I will open my mouth in a parable: I will utter dark sayings of old: which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us” (Psm. 78:2-3). We know this has reference to Jesus Christ because Matthew tells us:

All these things spake Jesus unto the multitude in parables; and without a parable spake he not unto them: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world (Matt. 13:34-35).

Another possible purpose for Jesus’ abundant use of parables was the many advantages resulting from this type of teaching. When Jesus presented the parables, He always spoke concerning things and circumstances with which the first-century Jews were very familiar, and with which they could associate. When Jesus said, “A sower went forth to sow” (Matt. 13:3), the people knew what was involved

in sowing the fields of Palestine. Jesus was not telling them anything new when He talked about the “mustard seed” (13:31). They knew this type of mustard seed was an extremely small herb seed, and yet, when planted, it would grow into a tree large enough to provide birds a place to build their nests. He was not giving the women new revelation when He spoke concerning the effects of “leaven” on meal (13:33). They knew the reason for adding leaven to meal was in order to have it permeate and influence the raising of the meal before baking the loaves. When He stated, “the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls” (13:45), and the kingdom also being “like unto a net” (13:47), they knew what the word pictures of Jesus portrayed because these were familiar sights to them.

Other advantages to the use of parables were that Jesus was also able to get the people nodding in agreement to His stories before He actually revealed the points behind the parables. This was certainly the case when Nathan approached king David with his parable about the poor man with his one ewe lamb. Those to whom Jesus spoke would respond in a similar fashion and would convict themselves before they knew the main point of His teaching. Also, the people would be prone to remember the parable long after it had been given.

Parable Interpretation

Many of those in the first century, especially the chief priests, scribes, and Pharisees, did not understand the parables of our Lord because they did not want to understand them, as we noted earlier. Unfortunately, many today have the same problem. It certainly does not take much investigation to realize there are several different interpretations given to the parables of Jesus. All kinds of faulty conclusions have been drawn concerning the

meaning of these stories, which have led to many false notions and false doctrines being accepted. Often, the problem which has resulted in these false ideas has been that people attempt to treat the parables like allegories. They try to make each detail in the parable have a special spiritual significance which is to be gleaned and remembered. This method of interpreting the parables makes the process extremely laborious, but it also allows one to make the parable say whatever he wants it to say and teach. Tertullian (ca. 160-ca. 220) was one who allegorized the parables of Christ. His interpretation of the parable of the prodigal son was:

the elder son represents the Jew who is envious of God's offer of salvation to the Gentile; the father is God; the younger son is the Christian; the inheritance is the wisdom and natural ability to know God which man possesses as his birthright; the citizen in the far country is the devil; the swine are the demons; the robe is the sonship lost by Adam through his transgression; the ring is Christian baptism; the feast is the Lord's Supper; and the fatted calf slain for the prodigal is the Savior at the Lord's Supper.⁸

Another example of such faulty interpretation of parables was made by Origen of Alexandria (ca. 185-ca. 254), who is also generally recognized as a Bible "scholar," though one would certainly question his scholarship after reading his interpretation of the parable of the good Samaritan:

The man who fell among robbers is Adam. Jerusalem represents heaven, and Jericho, since it was away from Jerusalem, represents the world. The robbers are man's enemies, the devil and his comrades. The priest stands for the Law, the Levite for the prophets, and the Good Samaritan for Christ himself. The beast, on which the wounded man was placed, is Christ's

body which bears the fallen Adam. The inn is the Church, while the two pence are the Father and the Son. The Good Samaritan promises that he will come back again, so Christ Jesus will come again at the end of the world.⁹

Such interpreting of our Lord's parables makes them utter nonsense. Therefore, we need a method of interpretation which will allow us to have a correct understanding of Jesus' teaching in the parables.

First, if we are to understand the parables correctly, we must examine the immediate context of the parable. What is recorded immediately before the parable was delivered, and what transpired immediately after the giving of the parable? What was happening when Jesus delivered the parable? Has Jesus been asked a question? What attitudes are being exemplified by those present when He proclaims this parable? Brother Guy N. Woods has been credited with saying, "A text, taken out of its context, becomes a pretext!" How true! We must be willing to leave the parables in their context and examine that context if we desire to interpret the parables correctly.

Second, we need to identify the central point of emphasis in the parable. The fact of having a central point of emphasis is one of, if not the main difference, between a parable and an allegory.

Third, we should identify the irrelevant details in the parable. Unlike the allegory, where essentially every detail carries special significance, the parable has much drapery or imagery, which is just intended to be scenery. The scenery is irrelevant to the main point of emphasis in the parable. Many of the details in a parable are not intended to teach a spiritual truth at all. Therefore, they are not intended to be interpreted or given spiritual application. Without a doubt, Tertullian and Origen did not understand this principle of parable interpretation.

Fourth, we must identify the relevant details of the parable. In each parable there are those details which are intended to teach some spiritual truth. These legitimate details need to be interpreted and an application needs to be drawn from them.

Fifth, we should examine, or compare, parallel passages as well as contrasting passages. It is certainly true that some of the parables are similar to other parable passages. These similarities are to be noted. We must remember, though, that just because a parable is similar to another passage does not mean the two are intended to teach the exact same message. The context and circumstances surrounding the delivering of the parable may be different, thereby resulting in a different interpretation.

Sixth, it is important to remember that matters of doctrine are to be based on clear, literal passages and not obscure, figurative passages like parables. As R. C. Trench says, “parables are not to be made first sources of doctrine.”¹⁰ Attempts to build a doctrine around an interpretation of a parable, which cannot be substantiated by other plain passages of Scripture, is dishonest, to say the least. Yet many have attempted to do that very thing.

Parable Impact

The parables of our Lord had a great impact on the first-century Jews, who were privileged to hear the stories firsthand. Those parables continue to impact mankind even today. We continue to marvel at the great lessons contained in them. We have heard many great sermons in the past dealing with the parables of Christ, and we pray we will continue to hear them as long as man holds the Word of God dear to his heart.

Brother Robert R. Taylor, Jr. described the permanence of the parables as follows:

The powerful, precious parables of Jesus never grow old to lovers of truth. They are as fresh as the early morning dew just outside my window as these words are penned. They never become boring; they are never irksome; they never lose their intensely inherent power to challenge us and to cultivate better things within us; they never lose their ever fresh approach to the intense issues of life. In rich reality they are more up-to-date than this morning's newspaper.¹¹

Conclusion

We have attempted to define a parable, contrast it with other figures of speech, examine the use of parables before the ministry of Christ, and notice the use of parables by Christ. We have also considered the correct method of interpreting parables, and hopefully we have come to realize the impact which was made, and continues to be made, on mankind by them. Surely, we are left in awe by the greatness of these stories. It is my prayer that they will always hold a special place in our hearts.

As we contemplate the parables of Jesus we are certainly impressed with the fact that our Lord was **the Master Teacher**.

Endnotes

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CHAPTER 2

The Parable Of The Wise And Foolish Virgins

B. J. Clarke

Introduction

OF THE NUMEROUS PARABLES spoken by our Lord, one of the most familiar is the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. It is our privilege, in this chapter, to investigate this poignant parable, located in Matthew 25:1-13. Before exploring the parable itself, let us notice the surrounding context of this passage. In the first segment of Matthew 24, Jesus promised that He would come in judgment upon the city of Jerusalem (Matt. 24:1-34). He made it abundantly clear that the judgment He was promising (Matt. 24:1-33) would come to pass in the lifetime of the generation of people to whom He was talking (Matt. 24:34). Hence, although some make the mistake of applying the first half of Matthew 24 to the final judgment, it is clear that Jesus confined the events discussed therein to the destruction of Jerusalem.

On the other hand, beginning with Matthew 24:36, Jesus makes a transition from discussing the judgment upon Jerusalem to discussing the final judgment of all humanity. His discourse on matters pertaining to the final judgment continues into Matthew 25 and encompasses the balance of the chapter. Repeatedly, throughout these verses, Jesus promises that there will

be a “coming of the Son of man” (Matt. 24:37, 39, 44; 25:31). Moreover, His coming is compared to:

1. A lord coming back to check on the steward whom he has placed in charge of his household and other servants (Matt. 24:45-51);
2. A bridegroom who came to marry his bride (Matt. 25:1-13);
3. A master who came and reckoned with his servants, after entrusting certain of his goods into their stewardship (Matt. 25:14-30).
4. A judge and shepherd, coming in glory with His holy angels, sitting upon the throne of judgment, gathering all nations, and separating the sheep from the goats (Matt. 25:31-46).

In the midst of these images, we learn that the second coming is like the coming of a bridegroom to the house of his bride, with joy and celebration! Hence, the concept of the second coming should not just be a dark one, but also a vibrant and joyful one because of the hope that awaits us. With that in mind, let us turn our attention to an exposition of the parable.

The Wedding

In order to help His hearers appreciate the nature of His kingdom, Jesus likened it unto “ten virgins¹, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom” (Matt. 25:1). In his book, **Manners & Customs of the Bible**, James Freeman writes:

On the occasion of a marriage the bridegroom, attended by his friends, went to the house of the bride, and brought her with her friends in joyful procession to his own house. The virgins mentioned in the text were probably some of the friends of the bride....²

Thus, the common Palestinian custom was for the friends of the bride to stay with her and keep her company until the arrival of the bridegroom, at which time they were to light their lamps, go out to meet the bridegroom, and follow in procession until reaching the bridegroom's house.

The Waiting

The ten virgins knew that the bridegroom was coming, but they did not know the precise moment at which he would arrive. So they waited, and waited, and waited some more. While the bridegroom tarried, they began to get sleepy. In fact, they all slumbered and slept (Matt. 25:5). We should not conclude from this statement that they had gone to bed for the night. The actual Greek word for "slumbered" means "to nod, to become drowsy, to doze."³ Thus, as the virgins waited for the coming of the bridegroom they all became drowsy, nodded off to sleep, then kept on sleeping.

Interestingly, the passage assigns no blame to the virgins for falling asleep. All of the virgins had done everything that they deemed necessary for the arrival of the bridegroom. Their sleep in no way interfered with their readiness to meet the bridegroom. We know this to be true because half of the virgins who were asleep were, nevertheless, still found ready at his arrival. In fact, even if they had all been wide-awake when the bridegroom arrived, it would not have increased their readiness to meet him.

The Waking

The ten virgins were jolted into awareness by the midnight cry that the bridegroom was coming. Consequently, they all arose to go out to meet him (Matt. 25:6-7). At this point, we hearken back to the information given earlier in the parable. In describing the virgins, Jesus said:

And five of them were wise, and five were foolish. They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them: But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps.

Although the exact timing of the coming of the bridegroom was a surprise to all of the virgins—they knew he was coming but did not know exactly when—some of the virgins had been wise enough to make ready for his arrival. Hence, when they heard the midnight cry, they simply arose and prepared their lamps for the procession.

The Waning

It is significant to observe that upon their arousal **all** of the virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. To trim their lamps they would trim the wicks, replenish the supply of oil in the dish, and light the lamps again.⁴ In the process of trimming their lamps, it did not take long for the foolish virgins to detect that the supply of oil necessary to keep their lamps burning was quickly waning, or diminishing. Hence, they said unto the wise, “Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out.”

Actually, the American Standard Version best captures the original here when it translates the virgins to say, “Our lamps are **going** out.” Their lamps had not been completely extinguished, but if they did not soon feed the flame of their lamps with more oil, the flickering flame would be snuffed out! This was not a problem for the wise virgins because, as we have already shown, they “took oil in their vessels with their lamps” (Matt. 25:4). There was an extra supply of oil in these vessels in addition to the oil that was already in the lamp or dish on top of the torch.⁵

The real point, of course, is that five of the virgins demonstrated their foolishness by failing to take any supply of oil with them. Alexander Maclaren offers

tremendous insight regarding the dwindling flame of the foolish virgins, and the lessons that can be learned therefrom:

The flame does not all die into darkness in a minute. There are stages in its death. Extinction is brought about by simply doing nothing. The five foolish virgins did not stray away into any forbidden paths. No positive sin is alleged against them. It was not of set purpose that the foolish five took no oil with them. They merely neglected to do so, not having the wit to look ahead...their negligence was the result, not of deliberate wish to let their lights go out, but of their heedlessness; and because of that negligence they earned the name of "foolish."⁶

It appears that the foolish virgins were as much astonished as they were alarmed at seeing their lights flicker down to extinction. Likewise, it is possible for professing Christians to live a lifetime, and never to be found out either by themselves or by anybody else until the Judgment Day. The foolish virgins, with their lamps, had a form of godliness, but denied the power thereof (2 Tim. 3:5). The wise virgins, on the other hand, made advance preparation, for whatever situation might arise, by bringing along extra oil, just in case it was needed.

The Withholding

Upon seeing that they had exhausted their own supply of oil, the foolish virgins asked their fellow virgins to share some of their oil with them. In reply, the wise virgins answered, "not so; lest there be not enough for us and you: but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves" (Matt. 25:9). The wise virgins prudently withheld their supply of oil from the foolish virgins, not because they were selfish, but because "every man shall bear his own burden" (Gal. 6:5). Whereas there are some

burdens we can help others to bear (Gal. 6:2), some responsibilities are non-transferable. For example, the development of personal character cannot be loaned from one person to another. Obedience to God is the very same way. A parent cannot obey the gospel for their child. Paul wrote, “So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God” (Rom. 14:12). At the final judgment, every one will receive “the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10).

Hence, the primary responsibility of the wise virgins was to prepare themselves for the coming of the bridegroom. They were not obligated to help the other virgins at the risk of losing their own standing with the bridegroom. Thus, they encouraged the foolish virgins to go to the merchants and “buy for yourselves” (Matt. 25:9). Keener observes:

It would have been difficult to find dealers at this time of night, however (although some catering shops could have been open if they were near a large city); the foolish bridesmaids were definitely going to be late.⁷

Furthermore, in Jewish culture at that time, no one was allowed on the streets after dark without a lighted lamp.⁸

The Welcoming

While the foolish virgins went in search of oil, the bridegroom came. The text reads: “and while they went to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut” (Matt. 25:10). Imagine the joy of the wise virgins, as they were welcomed into the long-awaited celebration surrounding the marriage of their friends! Thus, once the wise virgins were granted entrance, the closed door meant security, untold joy, and blessedness to them.

Similarly, in the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30), when the master returned to “reckon” with his servants, he was delighted to discover that the first two servants had duplicated the funds he had placed into their stewardship. He commended them for their preparation, saying to each of them, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord” (Matt. 25:21, 23). Because they had worked for the master, they were welcomed by the master. However, the man who had done nothing with his one talent was excluded. the master commanded that the unprofitable servant be cast into outer darkness, a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 25:30). Richard Trench makes a keen observation in comparing and contrasting the parable of the virgins and that of the parable of the talents:

A comparison of the causes which led to this servant’s exclusion, and those which led to that of the foolish virgins is full of warning and instruction to all. Those virgins erred through a vain **overconfidence**, this servant through an **underconfidence** that was equally vain and sinful. They were over bold; he was not bold enough. Thus two wrong aspects under which we may be tempted to regard God’s service, two rocks upon opposite sides on which faith is in danger of being shipwrecked, are laid down for us, as in a chart, that we may avoid them both. Those virgins counted it too easy a thing to serve the Lord; this servant counted it too hard.⁹

The Wailing

Whereas the wise virgins were welcomed and secure within the shut door, for the foolish virgins, who were without, there is a sad finality to the phrase “and the door was shut” (Matt. 25:10). In fact, the Greek tense used in this passage conveys the idea of the door being “shut, to

stay shut.”¹⁰ The following two quotations from Freeman well capture the finality of the shut door and the wailing that followed:

the foolish bridesmaids missed the entire procession back to the groom’s house...They also missed the critical element of the Jewish wedding, in which the bride was brought into the groom’s home under the wedding canopy. Having insulted the dignity of the host, they were not admitted to the feast, which lasted for seven days following the ceremony.¹¹

At all formal banquets the invited guests presented their tablets or cards to a servant stationed at the entrance-door for the purpose, care being taken to keep out uninvited spectators. When the company were assembled the ‘master of the house’ shut the door, and after that the servant was not allowed to admit any one, no matter how great the importunity.¹²

Someone may point out that, in Matthew 7:7, Jesus taught “knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for everyone that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened” (Matt. 7:7-8). Why, then, did not the foolish virgins receive that for which they asked? The answer is seen in the fact that the time for knocking and asking is not promised to us forever. A time is coming when it will be too late. Such a time came for the foolish virgins when, because of their unpreparedness, the doorkeeper refused to grant them entrance into the marriage feast.

The text does not reveal whether the foolish virgins, in their attempt to buy at such a late hour, were able to locate any oil, but nonetheless, they did make a final, desperate attempt to gain entrance into the wedding feast. They cried, saying, “Lord, Lord, open to us” (Matt. 25:11).

However, their earnest plea was met by the haunting words, "I know you not." Maclaren aptly observes:

The wedding bell has become a funeral knell. They were not enemies of the bridegroom, they thought themselves his friends. They let life ebb without securing the one thing needful, and the neglect was irremediable. There is a tragedy underlying many a life of outward religiousness and inward emptiness, and a dreadful discovery will flare in upon such, when they have to say to themselves, "This might have been once, and we missed it, lost it for ever."¹³

Their lack of preparation brought upon them embarrassing and permanent consequences. We find similarly haunting words spoken by our Lord in Luke 13:24-25:

Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able. When once the master of the house is risen up, and hath shut to the door, and ye begin to stand without, and to knock at the door, saying, Lord, Lord, open unto us; and he shall answer and say unto you, I know you not whence ye are:

It is interesting to observe that Revelation 3:20 depicts Jesus as standing at the door of our heart and knocking, desiring to gain entrance. If we hear His voice and open the door, then He will come in unto us, and we will enjoy His fellowship. If, on the other hand, we refuse to open the door for Jesus, then we should not be surprised to find that the door is shut for us on the Day of Judgment. If we refuse to hear the pleading of Jesus now, then He will refuse to hear our pleadings upon the Day of Judgment. For instance, consider the depiction of Matthew 7:21-23:

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

Crying, “Lord, Lord” can never take the place of living for the Lord. Jesus said, “Why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say (Luke 6:46).

The Watching

The purpose of the entire parable is summarized in the statement of Jesus recorded in Matthew 25:13, “Watch therefore; for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of Man cometh.” The latter phrase is a reaffirmation of what Jesus taught in Matthew 24:36, namely, that no man knows the day nor the hour when the second coming and the final judgment will take place (Matt. 24:36).

In fact, He compared His second coming with the judgment that came upon mankind in the days of Noah (Matt. 24:37). Noah, a preacher of righteousness, had warned the residents of earth, that a flood was coming (Gen. 6:3; 1 Pet. 3:20; 2 Pet. 2:5). However, they did not know the precise moment at which the flood would come. They continued going about the normal affairs of life, “eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark, and knew not until the flood came, and took them all away” (Matt. 24:38-39a). Jesus went on to say, “so shall also the coming of the Son of man be” (Matt. 24:39b).

In other words, when the second coming occurs, mankind will be engaged in the normal activities of life.

Farmers will be working in their fields and women will be grinding at the mill. Actually, these two examples are simply representative examples given by Jesus to show that when the final judgment occurs men and women will be found doing the things they normally do on a daily basis. Unlike the situation regarding the judgment upon Jerusalem, when many signs preceded its destruction (Matt. 24:4-33), there will be no ominous signs foreshadowing the arrival of the second coming of Christ.

It is certain that Jesus Christ is coming back to judge the world (Acts 17:31); it is uncertain as to when He is going to do so. This uncertainty is emphasized by the Lord Himself in a number of statements made in Matthew 24 and 25. Consider the following affirmations of the Christ:

Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come (Matt. 24:42).

Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh (Matt. 24:44).

Closely connected with these affirmations are the illustrations given by Jesus to prove the uncertainty as to the time of His second coming. Besides the illustration of Noah and the flood, Jesus refers to a householder, saying that if the householder had known at what time the thief was going to break into his house, he would have been on guard to prevent the thief from accomplishing his mission (Matt. 24:43).

The point is unmistakably clear: just as a man does not know when a thief is coming to break into his house, so, likewise we do not know when Jesus is coming. This point is further illustrated in the parable Jesus told about a servant who acted irresponsibly in the absence of his master. Moreover, this evil servant began to believe in his

heart that his lord was not coming back anytime soon. Consequently, he thought he could act any way he wanted to, without being detected or punished by his lord. However, Jesus said, "The lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of" (Matt. 24:50). At the coming of Christ each of us will meet the Lord in the very condition in which we were found when death removed us from this world. Accordingly, we must watch because, whether we be foolish or wise, with or without oil, we shall appear as we actually are when Jesus returns.

Conclusion

With no desire to press the parable of the virgins beyond its intended meaning, there are several similarities between this story and the final judgment that should be noted.

1. The kingdom of heaven represents the church and the bridegroom represents the Christ.

2. The virgins are the members of the church awaiting the second coming of Christ. The wise virgins represent the prepared members while the foolish virgins symbolize the unprepared.

3. Some suggest that the sleep of the virgins (Matt. 25:5) is equivalent to the sleep of death.

4. The midnight arrival of the bridegroom is representative of the second coming of Christ.

5. When the bridegroom comes the virgins arise from their sleep, presumably a reference to their resurrection from the dead.

6. At the second coming, the heavenly Bridegroom takes His bride, the true church, to His heavenly home, and the feast is held there (Rev. 21:1-5).

7. The shut door is demonstrative of the fact that there will be no last minute preparations to enter the heavenly kingdom.

The key lesson is that of being watchful in our waiting. Of course, the key question in the discussion of the final judgment is not so much “When will Jesus come?” but rather “What condition will He find me in when He comes”? The crucial emphasis of all that Jesus says in the 62 verses from Matthew 24:36-25:46 is that we must be prepared at all times for the final judgment because we do not know when it will occur. One of the tragic, but true, facts concerning the final judgment is that many will be found unprepared for its arrival. In the days of Noah the majority of human beings were unprepared for the flood, although they had been amply warned of its coming. Only Noah and his family (eight souls) were prepared for the coming of the flood.

On the final Day of Judgment some will be prepared and some will be unprepared. Moreover, being prepared involves more than just heeding the “thou shalt nots” of Holy Scripture. We must also pay attention to the “thou shalt” commandments. Sins of omission, i.e., failing to do what we ought to do, will damn our souls as surely as sins of commission, doing what we ought not to do! It is important to obey the gospel plan of salvation, but we must never forget that we are “created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). If our obedience to the Gospel is not followed by good works, performed with a warm heart, then we will not be welcomed into the heavenly kingdom at the final judgment.

In connection with this, it is important to remember that this parable proves that it is possible to quench the light of our Christian lamp. As Christians, we are to let our lights so shine before men that they may see our good works and the Father in heaven may be glorified (Matt. 5:16). In the midst of a crooked and perverse nation we

are to shine forth as lights in the world (Phil. 2:15). So often, the thing that shipwrecks the faith of Christians is not any positive wickedness, or conduct which would be branded as sin, but simply neglect and indifference. A Christian man has only to do what I am afraid a good many of us are in great danger of doing—that is, nothing—in order to ensure that his lamp shall go out. Consequently, we would do well to follow the admonition of our Lord, Who said: “let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning; and ye yourselves like unto men that wait for their Lord” (Luke 12:35-36).

Endnotes

1 J. W. McGarvey writes that this was the usual number of virgins for such an occasion, **The Fourfold Gospel** (Cogdill Foundation Publications, n.d.), p.675. Matthew Henry also suggests that “the Jews never held a synagogue, circumcised, kept the Passover, or contracted marriage, but ten persons at least were present. Boaz, when he married Ruth, had ten witnesses, Ruth 4:2” (**Matthew Henry’s Commentary**, Vol. V., p. 368).

2 James M. Freeman, **Manners & Customs Of The Bible** (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1996), p. 376.

3 Fritz Rienecker & Cleon Rogers, **Linguistic Key To The Greek New Testament** (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), p. 73.

4 There is some controversy as to whether the “lamps” were the “small Herodian oil lamps, which could be carried in the hand,” or the torches (sticks wrapped with oil-soaked rags), which were also used in Greek and Roman wedding ceremonies. However, it really does not matter which type of lamp is in view in this parable. “Whether these virgins carried torches, or merely lamps, as some commentators suppose, they needed a supply of oil to replenish their light, and hence were obliged to carry “vessels” to contain the supplies of oil.”

5 A. T. Robertson, **Word Pictures In The New Testament** Vol. 1., (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1930), p. 196.

6 Alexander Maclaren, **Expositions Of Holy Scripture** Vol. 7., (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984 reprint), pp. 185-186.

7 Craig S. Keener, **The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament** (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 116.

8 William Barclay, **The Gospel of Matthew** Vol. 2., (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 320.

9 Richard C. Trench, **Notes on the Parables** (Westwood, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1953), p. 288.

10 Robertson, p. 198.

11 Ibid, pp. 116-117.

12 Freeman, p. 379.

13 Maclaren, pp. 180-181.

CHAPTER 3

The Parable Of The Sower

James Meadows

Introduction

THE *POWER LECTURES HAVE*, for many years, proven to be one of the best. The Southaven church of Christ, under the oversight of her elders, with her preacher, B. J. Clarke, is to be commended for making this great lectureship available each year. The printed book will be read by many people for years to come and lives will be changed by its influence.

The parables of Jesus contain some of the richest teaching done by our Lord. I commend you for your decision to study the parables.

Jesus Spake In Parables

“And he spake many things unto them in parables...Another parable spake he unto them...all these things spake Jesus unto the multitude in parables” (Matt. 13:3, 33-34).¹ Parables constitute a great part of Jesus’ teaching, as He spoke more than thirty during His personal ministry.

What Is A Parable?

The etymology of the term is literally to lay down or throw down beside; to take something with which you are familiar, and put it down beside something with which you are not

familiar, and point out the similarities...an illustration put forth to clear up some difficult truth.²

The word is derived from two Greek words, “para” and “ballo,” and means to associate, to compare; the idea is that two things are placed near each other and points of resemblance are studied.³

The child’s definition is still good: “An earthly story with a heavenly meaning.” Jesus used things familiar to His hearers to illustrate the unknown.

How To Interpret And Understand Parables

First, “when Jesus himself gives an interpretation, it must be accepted as final and exhaustive.”⁴ Jesus interpreted the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:36-43). He no doubt intended for His method of interpreting this parable to be a key for interpreting other parables.

Second, in the absence of an explanation from Christ, parables should be interpreted in the light of the context. A failure to apply this rule has led many, in my judgment, to misinterpret the parable of the new garment on an old, and new wine put in old bottles (Luke 5:36-39). The Pharisees asked Jesus why John’s disciples and their disciples fasted and His did not (5:33). Jesus answered that it was not any more practical for His disciples to fast, while He was still with them, than it was for people to fast at a wedding, sew new cloth on an old garment, or put new wine in old bottles. Failure to observe the context in the interpretation of the parable has led many to have Jesus saying that He did not come to tack Christianity to the Old Law.

Third, if possible, locate the central idea of the parable and build the interpretation around it. As a rule, each parable contains one central point and is intended to

stress one important lesson, although many minor details may be included in doing this. Giving undue attention to minor details may lead one to misinterpret the parable and miss the main lesson.

Fourth, as far as possible, let the interpretation be natural and normal and the solution what one would naturally expect.

Parables—An Effective Method Of Teaching

The parable was one method of teaching used in the Old Testament. Balaam used parables in blessing Israel, instead of cursing it as Balak wanted him to do (Num. 23:7, 18). God, through Isaiah, used a parable to teach Judah and Israel a valuable lesson (Isa. 5:1-7).

Parables have a tendency to conceal the meaning and to get the consent of the mind before the application is driven home. Nathan's parable had the consent of David's mind before he told David, "Thou art the man" (2 Sam. 12:1-15). Jesus had the consent of the chief priest and the elders before "they perceived that he spake of them" (Matt. 21:23-46).

Why Jesus Spoke In Parables

Jesus began to speak in parables when the hostility of the scribes and Pharisees grew so great. The disciples asked, "Why speakest thou unto them in parables?" (Matt. 13:10). This was evidently a new form of teaching for the Lord, and the disciples were surprised. He then tells them why He spoke in parables.

First, He taught in parables because the time had not come for Him to speak plainly: "These things have I spoken unto you in proverbs ("parables," JM): but the time cometh, when I shall no more speak to you in proverbs, but I shall shew you plainly of the Father" (John 16:25).

Second, He spake in parables “because it is given unto you to know the mysteries (things not before revealed, JM) of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given” (Matt. 13:11).

Third, He spake in parables to take away from those that did not want the truth, even that which they already had: “For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance; but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath” (Matt. 13:12).

Fourth, He spake in parables to withhold truth from those who were dishonest and prejudiced:

Therefore speak I to them in parables; because they seeing see not, and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, by hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand, and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive; For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them (Matt. 13:13-15).

Jesus refused to cast pearls before swine (7:6). Truth was not forced upon people that did not want it in the first century, and neither should it be today (2 Thess. 2:10-12). Parables give greater light to some and increased darkness to others.

Fifth, speaking in parables fulfilled prophecy:

All these things spake Jesus unto the multitude in parables; and without a parable spake he not unto them: That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world (Matt. 13:34-35).

Discussion

The Parable Of The Sower

Behold, a sower went forth to sow, and when he sowed, some seeds fell by wayside, and the fowls came and devoured them up; Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth; and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth; and when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up and choked them; But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear (Matt. 13:3-9).

It shall be our purpose to look at the sower, the seed, and the soils.

The Sower

A sower going forth to sow was a very familiar scene in the Lord's day. The sower represents the teacher: "He that soweth the good seed is the Son of Man" (Matt. 13:37). Then the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles to enable them to sow the seed (John 16:13; Acts 1:8). They had been instructed by the Lord: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). After the Holy Spirit came upon them, "they went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. Amen" (16:20). Every Christian should sow the seed. Those that were scattered abroad in the early church "went every where preaching the word" (Acts 8:4). Paul told the Hebrews that they had been Christians long enough that they should be teaching others (Heb. 5:12-14). Timothy was to commit "to faithful man" that which he had learned that they might "teach others" (2 Tim. 2:2).

The Holy Spirit and angels are not the ones to sow the seed. It was Spirit-guided men that sowed the seed in Acts 2. The angel and the Holy Spirit spoke to the man (Philip) with the message to bring him in contact with the man (the eunuch) who needed to be saved (8:26, 29). Ananias (a man) spoke to Saul (the sinner) and told him what he must do to be saved. (If ever the Holy Spirit was going to speak directly to the sinner, surely this was the appropriate time.) The angel told Cornelius to send for Peter (a man), who “shall tell thee what thou oughtest to do” (10:3-6). God placed “this treasure in earthen vessels,” referring primarily to the apostles here in 2 Corinthians 4:7, but we have the same treasure in the Bible today.

Some Truths The Sower Must Recognize

First, he must sow the seed and leave the increase to God:

For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth; it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it (Isa. 55:10-11).

I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase (1 Cor. 3:6).

We live in an age that expects quick results, but oftentimes it takes years for a seed to germinate in the heart of a man. There must be patience.

Second, he must sow at all times, not waiting until everything is favorable:

He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that observeth the clouds shall not reap. As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child; even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all. In the morning sow the seed, and in the evening withhold not thy hand; for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good (Eccl. 11:4-6).

Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine (2 Tim. 4:2).

Third, the sower must sow the seed, realizing that others may reap the harvest. Jesus said to His disciples:

Say not ye, there are yet four months, and then cometh the harvest? Behold, I say unto you, lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest. And he that reapeth receiveth wages and gathereth fruit unto life eternal; that both he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together. And herein is that saying true, one soweth, and another reapeth. I sent you to reap that whereon ye bestowed no labour; other men laboured, and ye are entered into their labours (John 4:35-38).

Many times the preacher in a Gospel meeting reaps the harvest of the seed sown by the local preacher and the Bible teachers. But all can rejoice together because souls have been saved.

Fourth, the sower must sow on all kinds of soil. Christ recognized that the Word would not produce the desired effect in some, but that did not keep Him from dying to make the word of salvation possible. Likewise we must continue to seek and save the lost even though the seed will fall on some unfruitful soils.

Fifth, the sower must sow with the right attitude:

And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness, instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; and that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will (2 Tim. 2:24-26).

But speaking the truth in love, may grow up unto him in all things, which is the head, even Christ (Eph. 4:15).

Sixth, the sower must believe in the seed he sows. No farmer would plant seed that he did not believe would germinate and grow. Paul believed that the seed (the Gospel) is God's power to save men (Rom. 1:16) and that it is alive (Heb. 4:12).

The Seed

Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God (Luke 8:11).

The sower soweth the word (Mark 4:14).

Seed has in it the germ of life. Natural seeds have the germ of life. Scientists can make a grain of corn that looks like the real seed, but they cannot place in it the germ of life. The spiritual life germ is in the Word:

The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life (John 6:63).

Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God which liveth and abideth forever (1 Pet. 1:23).

For the word of God is quick, and powerful (Heb. 4:12).

Some say they do not believe there is any life in the Gospel because they cannot see it. Neither can one see life

in a grain of corn, but it germinates, and no one refuses to plant it because they cannot see the life germ. We need more faith in the life of the living Word.

Seed always produces after its kind. This has been an immutable law of God from the beginning:

And God said, Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind, whose seed is in itself upon the earth; and it was so (Gen. 1:11).

Be not deceived; God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap (Gal. 6:7).

In the vegetable kingdom, God created everything full grown, but seed has been necessary since that time to produce the same crop. In the animal kingdom, God created everything full grown, but since that time the seed must be planted for reproduction. Archaeologists have found wheat in sealed jars in the tombs of the Pharaohs, possibly three or four thousand years old, but, when planted, it still produced wheat.

The seed of the kingdom produced Christians only, and only Christians, in the first century, and it will produce the same today. If the Word of God produces something besides Christians today, then it produced something other than Christians in the first century. Acts 11:26; 26:28; and 1 Peter 4:16 clearly show that it produced Christians in the first century. If the Word of God produces something other than Christians today, then it has changed in its nature. This cannot be true. Peter declares:

For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away; But the word of the Lord endureth forever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you (1 Pet. 1:24-25).

It is not necessary to trace an unbroken line of succession from the apostolic days, but just preach and teach what was preached then. Christians will be the fruit produced!

Three major facts prove the necessity of the seed to produce Christians today. **First**, there are no Christians where the Word of God has not gone. This clearly shows that the only way the Holy Spirit converts people is through the Word. **Second**, since the Word of God is the seed of the kingdom, then one cannot produce citizens of God's kingdom without the seed. No farmer believes he can produce any crop without the seed of that crop. One cannot produce Christians without the seed. **Third**, one cannot call upon the Lord unless one knows about the Lord:

For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed; and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher...So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Rom. 10:13-17).

God draws men through teaching:

No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him; and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me (John 6:44-45).

We are called by the Gospel: "Whereunto he called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thess. 2:14).

Seed can be mixed. Oftentimes when hot pepper and sweet pepper are planted side by side, the sweet pepper will have a hot pepper taste. Field corn planted

beside popcorn will often keep the popcorn from popping. Just as seed can be mixed in the natural realm, so the Gospel can be mixed with the doctrines of men:

Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, the kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field; But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way (Matt. 13:24-25).

There were those among the Galatians who were trying to pervert the Gospel of Christ (Gal. 1:6-12). When the pure Gospel is mixed with the doctrines of men, it will produce something other than Christians.

The Soil

The soil is the heart of man: "Those by the wayside are they that hear; then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts" (Luke 8:12). The success of the sowing depends upon the soil into which the seed falls. Many Bible verses emphasize the importance of a prepared heart: "Nevertheless, there are good things found in thee, in that thou hast taken away the groves out of the land, and hast prepared thine heart to seek God" (2 Chron. 19:3). Hezekiah prayed for every one that "prepareth his heart to seek God" (30:19), and Ezra "had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments" (Ezra 7:10). W. Gaddys Roy noted, "The word that is sown in an unprepared heart has no better opportunity to spring forth and grow than seed that is sown in unprepared soil."⁵ When the desired result is not secured by truth, the deficiency is not in the truth, but in an improper and censurable attitude of heart toward the truth. The soil that is unfavorable to the reception of the seed of the kingdom is fertile for the seeds of error.

Failure Rather Than Success

Failure rather than success has characterized men and their efforts. Only a few people, in comparison to the number born, live to maturity. In the financial world, failure again is the rule. Jesus said, “For ye have the poor always with you” (Matt. 26:11). Literally thousands in our nation do not possess enough to provide for their own burial. In the educational world, one can think of the thousands who enter college but never finish. Even in the church hundreds begin, but do not endure to the end.

Jesus knew that His followers would meet opposition and persecution. He knew they would be discouraged. In speaking this parable, Jesus was preparing His disciples for the different ways the Word of God would be received.

The Wayside Soil Or Wayside Hearer

And he spake many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold, a sower went forth to sow; And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up (Matt. 13:3-4).

And these are they by the way side, where the word is sown; but when they have heard, Satan cometh immediately, and taketh away the word that was sown in their hearts (Mark 4:15).

Those by the way side are they that hear; then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved (Luke 8:12).

The wayside soil is a hard path that is fertile, but packed and unplowed and will not receive the seed. The heart represented by the wayside soil is one that does not understand the Word and has no special interest in it (Matt. 13:19); Mark suggests that the Word is removed from the heart immediately (Mark 4:15); Luke shows that this one

does not believe and is not saved (Luke 8:12). This heart is hard, impenetrable, and untouched (if so, briefly) by what it hears.

The devil quickly removes the seed from the wayside soil. Luke implies that, if the Word were allowed to dwell in the heart until sufficient interest arises for faith to result, salvation would follow (Luke 8:12). Satan, knowing the power of God's Word, "cometh immediately, and taketh away the word" (Mark 4:15). Satan uses many methods to snatch away the Word and replace it with more immediate and attractive interest. **First**, individuals are given recognition in their social circles to absorb their time and interest, lest they become too interested in the Word of God. **Second**, some individuals may hear the truth in a Gospel meeting but are immediately exalted in their denominational churches to wean them from further hearing. **Third**, casting a thought in the heart quickly removes the Word. Judas allowed the thought of money to continually tread upon his heart so that he could not receive the words of the Lord (Matt. 26:14-16). Pontius Pilate wanted to release Jesus but Satan, through the Jews, said, "If thou let this man go, thou art not the friend of Caesar" (John 19:12). **Fourth**, on some occasions individuals hear the Word of God and are moved by it, but Satan says, "You have plenty of time to obey it; wait" (cf. Acts 24:25).

Who are some wayside hearers? First, these hear the Word with their minds already made up. The Athenians heard Paul, but "they spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or hear some new thing" (Acts 17:21). **Second**, these hear but think the truth applies to someone else. Jesus told the Pharisees that the truth will make you free (John 8:32). They immediately responded, "We be Abraham's seed and were never in bondage to any man: how sayest thou, ye shall be made free?" (8:33). Many

people hear the Word today and wish a friend had been there because “he surely did need it.” **Third**, these hear the truth but go out and live as they did before. No effort is put forth to do the things heard (cf. Matt. 7:24-27; Jas. 1:22-25). **Fourth**, these hear the Word but have allowed the world to trample on their hearts so long that they are untouched.

What are some things that may harden the heart? **First**, prejudice hardened the hearts of the Jews so that they could not see, hear, and understand what Jesus taught (Matt. 13:14-15). Prejudice hardened the hearts of Stephen’s audience and, unable to “resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake” (Acts 6:10), they raised up false witnesses (6:11-15). **Second**, no love for the truth will harden hearts. Paul mentioned some in Thessalonica that “received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved” (2 Thess. 2:10). **Third**, one’s heart can be hardened by continually resisting the truth. Pharaoh hardened his heart by resisting God’s truth (Exod. 8:19-20). One’s heart and conscience can be seared through violation and neglect of truth (1 Tim. 4:1-2). **Fourth**, practicing sin will harden one’s heart: “But exhort one another daily while it is called Today; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:13).

The Stony Ground Or Stony Ground Hearer

Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth; and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth: And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away (Matt. 13:5-6).

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 (13:20-21).

And these are they likewise which are sown on stony ground; who, when they have heard the word, immediately receive it with gladness; And have no root in themselves, and so endure but for a time: afterward, when affliction or persecution ariseth for the word's sake, immediately they are offended (Mark 4:16-17).

They on the rock are they, which, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, which for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away (Luke 8:13).

The Lord is not describing soil that has a few rocks scattered in it, but solid rock with a thin layer of earth on top. The soil has some preparation but no depth (Matt. 13:5). The plants soon spring up, but they also soon wither away (13:6).

The heart represented by the stony ground is a heart without any strong convictions. It is a heart that “immediately” receives the Word of God (Mark 4:16) with “joy” (Matt. 13:20) or “gladness” (Mark 4:16). He even becomes a Christian, because Luke says “which for a while believe” (Luke 8:13). Mark says he will “endure but for a time” (Mark 4:17), but “when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended” (Matt. 13:21), or he will “in time of temptation fall away” (Luke 8:13). This one is a “fair weather” Christian like those that followed Jesus for “the loaves” (John 6:26), but, when the hard sayings came, “many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him” (6:60, 66). This one is dependable as long as the road is smooth, but the least obstacle offends this one. Such an individual is controlled more by emotion than by conviction. Emotions have their

place in the hearts and lives of men, but, when they are resting on a superficial understanding, they can be disastrous.

Who are some stony ground hearers? First, some of those converted during a Gospel meeting can be classed in this category. Emotions are stirred, and, on a sudden impulse, they obey the Gospel. **Second**, these obey the Gospel without really counting the cost:

And there went great multitudes with him: and he turned, and said unto them, If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him, Saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish. Or what king, going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and consulteth whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is yet a great way off, he sendeth an ambassage, and desireth conditions of peace. So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:25-33).

It costs putting God's kingdom first (Matt. 6:33), and it costs loving God more than father and mother (10:37). **Third**, these obey without proper consideration of what one must endure: "he that endureth to the end shall be saved" (10:22). One must endure "hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ" (2 Tim. 2:3), all things for the sake of others (2:10), sound doctrine (4:1-4), chastening (Heb. 12:7), and trials (Jas. 1:12; 5:11): "As sunlight strengthens

the healthy plant, but withers the sickly, ill-rooted one, so tribulation establishes real faith, but destroys the counterfeit.”⁶ **Fourth**, these deny the Lord as quickly as they confess Him. The Galatians, with quickness and joy, received the Word that Paul preached (Gal. 4:12-15) but were “soon removed from him that called you unto the grace of Christ unto another gospel” (1:6): “It is not always the one that most readily accepts the gospel call that makes the most useful Christian; but rather the one who deliberately ponders, and considers well what it means.”⁷

The stony ground hearer clearly shows that one can fall from the grace of God. Luke states that such ones “for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away” (Luke 8:13). One cannot fall away from where one has not been: “Take heed brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God” (Heb. 3:12).

The Thorny Ground Or Thorny Ground Hearer

And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them (Matt. 13:7).

He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful (13:22).

And these are they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word, And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful (Mark 4:18-19).

And that which fell among thorns are they, which, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection (Luke 8:14).

The thorny ground is plowed deeply and receives some preparation. The ground is fertile because the plants live and grow. The thorns being left in it implies inadequate preparation. It might be like a garden planted, but not cultivated.

The heart represented by the thorny ground is a divided heart with mixed emotions. These ones “heareth the word” (Matt. 13:22; Mark 4:18) and “go forth” (Luke 8:14). This one even bears fruit, which is suggested by the fact that “it becometh unfruitful” (Mark 4:19) and “bring no fruit to perfection” (Luke 8:14). Grass, briars, and lack of cultivation can keep fruit from being perfect. Plants close to a large, wooded area will not bring fruit to perfection because the elements in the ground are divided between the plants and the trees. In the same way, the thorns can keep our spiritual fruit from being perfect.

What are some thorns that choke the Word in the heart of the stony ground hearer? First, the “care of this world” (Matt. 13:22) or “the cares of this world” (Mark 4:19) choke lives. J. B. Phillips translates it “worries of this life” or “worries of the times.” “Care” sometimes means interest, thoughtfulness, but it also means distraction, anxiety, worry. The Lord is talking about “distracting anxieties.” 1 Timothy 5:8 clearly implies that some concern, forethought, and planning are involved in caring for one’s family, but to become so “wrapped up” in making a living to the neglect of spiritual development is choking the Word of God in many lives. Worry and anxiety on Martha’s part choked out the good part (Luke 10:38-42). Sometimes we allow the lesser important to choke out the most important (21:34-35).

Second, “the deceitfulness of riches” (Matt. 13:22) chokes some lives. Riches promise happiness but cannot fulfill:

He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase; this is also vanity (Eccl. 5:10).

But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition (1 Tim. 6:9).

As long as “that which God promises is felt to be good, but also that which the world promises is felt to be equally good, there will be an attempt to serve God and mammon.”⁸ The “deceitfulness of riches” blinded the Laodiceans to their true condition (Rev. 3:14-17).

Third, “pleasures of this life” (Luke 8:14) or “the lusts of other things” (Mark 4:19) are another thorn that chokes out the Word. Christianity does not take the joy out of life, but it does “demand that we put first things first” (Matt. 6:33). The “pleasures of this life” are not necessarily wrong, but, too often, they so fill one’s life that the Word is choked out. There may be first a set of golf clubs, then fishing equipment, then a boat, then a cabin on the lake, then joining some club, etc., until there is little or no time for God and His Word.

The thorny ground hearer has enough religion to make him miserable, regarding the things of the world, but not little enough to go all the way into the world. The condition of the thorny ground hearer is a dangerous one. He remains in full fellowship with the church and is regarded by others, as well as himself, as enjoying the full approval of heaven. He fails to recognize his true condition and is not led to correct it. How many today are confidently expecting to go to heaven because they once obeyed the Gospel and became members of the church but are allowing the thorns to choke out God and His Word? Such are deceived regarding their true condition.

The Good Ground Or Good Ground Hearer

But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold (Matt. 13:8).

But he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty (13:23).

And these are they which are sown on good ground; such as hear the word, and receive it, and bring forth fruit, some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some an hundred (Mark 4:20).

But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience (Luke 8:15).

The good ground is rich, plowed deeply, rocks and thorns are removed, and the seed produces a good crop. Every farmer recognizes the great value of preparing the ground before planting the seed.

The good ground hearer has an “honest and good heart” (Luke 8:15): “For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord” (Ezra 7:10). An honest heart is one that is “good, admirable, becoming, has also the ethical meaning of what is fair, right, honourable.”⁹ Honesty is a characteristic that is essential, not only in becoming a Christian, but in living the Christian life. We are to provide things honest in the sight of all men (Rom. 12:17; 2 Cor. 8:21). We are to think on honest things (Phil. 4:8). We should have our manner of life honest before the world (Heb. 13:18).

The good ground hearer “heareth the word” (Matt. 13:23). It is essential to hear the Word of God aright.

Faith comes by hearing the Word of God (Rom. 10:17): “And many of the Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptized” (Acts 18:8).

The good ground hearer “understandeth it” (Matt. 13:23). This understanding “is the result, not of any natural superiority, but of superior attention which he gives it.”¹⁰ Understand means to perceive, to grasp the meaning of, to know. Some do not understand because they close their eyes and stop their ears (13:13-15). Some do not understand because they are blind to their true condition (John 8:32-43). Understanding is not only possible but it is essential to please God. Jesus opened the understanding of His disciples (Luke 24:45); Philip asked the eunuch “understandest thou what thou readest” (Acts 8:30); Paul declared “when you read, ye may understand” (Eph. 3:4; cf. 5:17).

The good ground hearer receives the Word (Mark 4:20). To receive something means to take it. When one hears the Word of God, one must really take it into his mind, or the mind may automatically close the door and forget it. Everyone that is pleasing to God must receive the Word of God. The Samaritans believed what Philip preached and were baptized (Acts 8:12), but Luke sums it all up by saying they “had received the word of God” (8:14). Cornelius received the Word of God because he had prepared his heart to receive it (10:33). The Bereans “received the word of God with all readiness of mind” (17:11). The Thessalonians “received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God” (1 Thess. 2:13). James tells us we are to “receive with meekness the engrafted word” (Jas. 1:21).

The good ground hearer is one that keeps the Word and brings forth fruit with patience (Luke 8:15). The farmer realizes that he must wait patiently for the harvest: “Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious

fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it” (Jas. 5:7). The Christian likewise must bear patiently under the trials of life (Luke 21:19; Rom. 8:25; Heb. 10:36; Gal. 6:9). The fruit-bearing Christian is the only one pleasing to God (John 15:1-8). The fruit born is the same, but some bear more fruit than others because of ability.

The good ground hearer differs from all the others. First, he differs from the wayside hearer in that he understands the Word and does not allow Satan to take it away. **Second**, he differs from the stony ground hearer in that he does not allow temptations to overcome him, but he overcomes them. **Third**, he differs from the thorny ground hearer in that he does not allow the cares, riches, and pleasures to choke the Word. **Fourth**, he differs from all classes in that he alone bears fruit pleasing to God.

Conclusion

The parable of the sower emphasizes the importance of the seed (the Word of God) and the sower, but emphasis is also placed on the soils (human hearts). The seed is the best (the Word of God), the sower may be highly skilled in sowing, but all efforts will fail if the soil is not properly prepared to receive the seed. This parable clearly gives emphasis to the truth, but sad truth, that only one-fourth of those that hear the Word of God will be saved.

Endnotes

1 All quotes are from the King James Version unless otherwise noted.

2 Guy N. Woods, **Sermons On Salvation** (Austin: R. B. Sweet, 1959), p. 15.

3 W. F. Ledlow, **Jesus and His Methods** (Austin: Old Paths Book Club, 1956 reprint), p. 232.

4 J. W. McGarvey, **The New Testament Commentary —Matthew and Mark**, Volume 1 (Delight, AR: Gospel Light Publishing, 1875), p. 116.

5 W. Gaddys Roy, **Sermon Outlines on the Parables of Jesus** (Montgomery, AL: Alabama Christian College Bookstore, 1963), p. 15.

6 J. W. McGarvey & Philip Y. Pendleton, **The Fourfold Gospel** (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing), p. 334.

7 Ledlow, p. 232.

8 R. C. Trench, **Notes on the Parables of the Lord** (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1948), p. 189.

9 W. E. Vine, **An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words** (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1962), p. 229.

10 McGarvey, p. 120.

References

A. **Sermons From the Parables**, Clovis Chappell.

B. **Sermon Outlines on the Parables of Jesus**, W. Gaddys Roy.

C. **The Parables of Jesus**, Bryan Vinson, Preceptor.

D. **Soils and Seeds of Sectarianism**, James D. Bales.

E. **Sermon Notes on the Parables**, Frank L. Cox.

F. Several commentaries consulted.

CHAPTER 4

The Parable Of The Barren Fig Tree

Keith Mosher, Sr.

Preface

SO MANY WONDERFUL MEMORIES always flood my mind whenever my beloved brother and friend, B. J. Clarke, invites me to speak on the **POWER** lectureship. I remember the great associations with the faithful and good brethren at Southaven and the wonderful way that my family and I were treated during our brief years there. I remember, with a certain nostalgia, Homer Eaton, Charles Frazier, Donnie Morgan, Raleigh Wood, Frank Boone, and so many other dear brothers and sisters who have gone to their reward. Their names, though not listed here because of time and space restraints, are well known in the “Lamb’s Book of Life” and precious indeed in my memory. This brief essay is dedicated here to my dear, precious friends from the Southaven congregation. May our Father bless, indeed, all who labor for this great church.

Introduction

Those who hear or read parables and are familiar with this literary genre have come to expect a story that is believable. C. H. Dodd has emphasized this credibility by stating that, in a parable, “all is true to nature and to

life. Each is a perfect picture of something that can be observed in the world of our experience.”¹ In fact it has become a cliché in analyzing parables that such stories must be true to life, either in an actual way or in a way that recognizes the possibility of the occurrences in the accounts.² If an event in a parable does contain a feature (or features) which conflicts with daily experience, such events are attempts to shatter complacency in the hearer.³ The parable of the “barren fig tree” (Luke 13:6-9) is a story that runs counter to the everyday experience of the people of Jesus’ time and challenges the natural reason of the hearer. But such parables also show the hearer that there is a Divine impingement upon human existence.

A study of parables leads one to notice the historical settings of each. At least eight were taught in answer to questions (Matt. 9:11, 14; 15:2; 19:16; Luke 10:29; 20:2; Matt. 18:21; Luke 13:23). Three parables were given after certain requests were made: (1) “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1-13); (2) “Master speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me” (12:13-21); (3) “Sir, we would see Jesus” (John 12:20-24).

Further, one parable was spoken in answer to an accusation (Matthew 12:43-45), and one was given because of the actions of the Pharisees (John 9-10). A full passage of parables was given to counter the murmuring of the Pharisees (Luke 15), and another was taught because the Pharisees had spoken in derision of the Christ (ch. 16). Two parables were spoken on feast days (7:36-50; 14:7-24), and several parables state their purposes (e.g., 18:1, 9; 19:11).

All of the above brief information exemplifies the great need to study a parable in its context. In this essay, the agricultural background of fig trees will be examined, along with the inspired setting, which will include the immediate context of the parable assigned and its setting

in Biblical teaching. The final point of this discussion will be concerned with applications or lessons from the parable.

The Parable

He spake also this parable; A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground? And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it: And if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down (Luke 13:6-9).⁴

The Agricultural Background

Bible students are well aware that the earliest reference to the fig tree is the record of Adam and Eve's sewing fig leaves together to "make themselves aprons" (Gen. 3:7). It is also the case that Canaan, the promised land, was spoken of as "a land of wheat and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of oil, olive, and honey" (Deut. 8:8). The report of the Hebrew "spies" on Canaan, in fact, was that the land was a place dotted with fig trees (Num. 13:23).

Figs were an important diet staple, and, when the Israelites were in the wilderness, those ancient people griped about not having any (Num. 20:5). The Hebrews were remembering the figs in Egypt, which trees, incidentally, were smitten by God when He plagued the Egyptians (Psm. 105:33). Masterman notes that:

It is only necessary to ride a few miles among the mountain villages of Palestine, with their extensive fig gardens, to realize what a long-lasting injury would be the destruction of these slow-growing trees.⁵

What a threat from God, then, when He informed Israel that, if she were unfaithful, her fig trees (among other things) would be smitten (Jer. 5:17; Hos. 2:12; Amos 4:9)!

Because the fig tree took such a long time to mature, the plant became a symbol of long-lasting peace and prosperity: “And Judah and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, from Dan even to Beer-sheba, all the days of Solomon” (1 Kings 4:25). Even the heathen used the fig as a metaphor for prosperity, for the Chaldean Rabshakeh (general) told the Israelites who were under siege:

Hearken not to Hezekiah: for thus saith the king of Assyria, Make an agreement with me by a present (tribute payment, KM), and come out to me: and eat ye every one of his vine, and every one of his fig tree, and drink ye every one the waters of his own cistern (Isa. 36:16).

The metaphor of the fig tree and prosperity was so firmly entrenched in the minds of the ancient near-easterners that Habbakkuk could write that only a solidly based faith in God could rejoice “Although the fig tree shall not blossom” (Hab. 3:17a).

Many, in researching the fig tree, note that the “fruit often appears before the leaves.”⁶

But Masterman also indicates that wild fig trees are usually barren and are described by natives as “male trees,” for it is supposed that their presence helps pollinate the cultivated variety⁷: “The immature flowers harbor small insects which convey pollen to the female flowers and by their irritating presence stimulate the growth of the fruit.”⁸ Cultivated fig trees can grow to a height of ten or fifteen feet (some to twenty-five feet), and the impressive foliage is very useful for shade (cf. John 1:48).⁹ The Bible also gives evidence of a large variety of fig trees in Palestine (cf. Jer. 24:1-8; 29:17). According to Masterman there are

two crops annually of cultivated figs—in about June (from the last year’s sprouts) and August (from the sprouts of spring).¹⁰ Palestinian fig trees have no leaves from December to March (Matt. 24:32), at which time tiny “green figs” appear (S. of Sol. 2:13), and the Bible refers to these that usually fall to the ground as the “unripe figs” or “untimely figs” (Rev. 6:13; Isa. 34:4). The June or early figs are those “untimely” ones that cling to the tree and mature in spring.¹¹ These latter agricultural facts are the reason Jesus expected some figs on a certain tree, even though the “time of figs” was not yet (Mark 11:13; cf. Matt. 21:17-22). A fig tree with leaves should at least have “early figs” on it, for such a tree shows it is **not** barren. This latter fig tree, incidentally, became a symbol of hypocrisy!

The Inspired Setting

One’s concept of God is vitally linked to one’s obedience (or lack thereof) to God. One who falsely assumes that his difficulties in life are to be blamed on God or that one’s station in life has been achieved by oneself will not likely be in a frame of mind suitable to doing that which God commands. The context of the **parable of the barren fig tree** is the Lord’s teaching on the events of life and what (or who) causes them:

There were present at that season some that told him of the Galilaeans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answering said unto them, Suppose ye that these Galilaeans were sinners above all the Galilaeans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish. Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish (Luke 13:1-5).

How many are wont to blame God for the catastrophes in life? Jesus asked about some Galilaeans Pilate had slain (13:1)! Were the men at Siloam great sinners and so a tower fell on them? No! One must repent of such surmising (13:5). Who is to blame, then, for the barren reaction of Judaism to the teachings of Jesus? Did God “slay” the men of Siloam—that is, did God cause the problem? No! Did God do something to cause Judah’s disobedience? No!

Jesus insists that Judah is like a barren fig tree (13:6). The “certain man” represents God, Who is pictured as desiring a fruitful nation (cf. Isa. 5:1-5), but the “fig-tree” (Jewry) has produced no figs (Luke 13:6b). The owner of the tree had sought fruit for **three** years (probably a representation of the length of Jesus’ ministry: however, some think the three years represent God’s call to Israel through the Law, the prophets, and the Christ¹²). The fig tree is “useless” (KJV has “cumbereth”) and should be cut down, says the owner (13:7b). But the “dresser” (representative of Christ) begs for one more year of “grace” to see if the tree can be helped (13:8). This plea of the dressers represents one last effort to summon Israel to repentance. (Some think the “year” should include John the Baptizer’s preaching, Jesus’ ministry, and a thirty-seven-year period of “grace” until A.D. 70.¹³ However, every Jew and Gentile had to obey the same message after Pentecost [Gal. 3:23-29].) It is the case, historically, that Israel generally rejected Christ’s plea and was “cut down” (cf. Acts 13:46). Her final moment in history, in fact, was the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70 (Matt. 24).

The Jews not only rejected God but tried to blame God for their being lost (Rom. 9-11). But such a concept of blaming God is error in the extreme and has led many to miss salvation. For example, note the teaching of the ancient Jewish prophet Micah:

Hear ye now what the Lord saith; Arise, contend thou before the mountains, and let the hills hear thy voice. Hear ye, O mountains, the Lord's controversy, and ye strong foundations of the earth: for the Lord hath a controversy with his people, and he will plead with Israel. O my people, what have I done unto thee? and wherein have I wearied thee? testify against me. For I brought thee up out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed thee out of the house of servants; and I sent before thee Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. O my people, remember now what Balak king of Moab consulted, and what Balaam the son of Beor answered him from Shittim unto Gilgal; that ye may know the righteousness of the Lord. Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the high God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God? (Mic. 6:1-8).

The form of Micah's teaching is a "court-room" scene or judicial "contest" between God and Israel. Micah reminds Israel of the great blessings she has received from God (6:1-5). Then Micah notes that her attitude was that God was not appeased by any kind of outward sacrifice (6:6-7). Note especially Micah 6:3 and God's passionate question: "O my people, what have I done unto thee? and wherein have I wearied thee? testify against me."

The people's response bespeaks a wrong concept of their living God. They thought He was too hard to please, and they ceased trying to serve Him at all! No burnt offering, nor thousands of rams, nor ten thousand rivers of oil, nor offering their first-born would placate God, according to the Israelites (6:6-7).

But, God **had** showed them what He required: to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God (6:8)! One is reminded, when reading the above passage from Micah, of the “one-talent man” who failed to serve the Lord because he just “knew” that his Lord was a “hard man” and could not be pleased (Matt. 25:24). The Lord’s response to such erroneous thinking was that the “one-talent” servant was actually “wicked and slothful” (25:26). Truly, all need to stop blaming God for their failure to obey His commands! Spence, in commenting on Luke 13:6 and the fig tree, notes:

Jesus spoke this parable of the barren fig tree, which contained in language scarcely veiled at all, warnings to Israel as a nation—the most sombre (sic) and threatening he had yet given utterance to. “Hear O people,” said the Master. “In the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts is a fig tree, long planted there, but utterly unfruitful. It is now on its last trial; indeed were it not for the intercession [sic] of the Gardener, the Lord of the vineyard had already pronounced its final doom.”¹⁴

What brought Israel’s doom? Certainly God did not cause the rebellion of His people. Men need to look to themselves for the source of God’s condemnation. However, there is in man a tendency to love self more than all else. The apostle Paul dealt with this latter problem when he wrote:

Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; And did all eat the same spiritual meat; And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ. But with many of them God was not well pleased:

for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted. Neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand. Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer. Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come. Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall. There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it. Wherefore, my dearly beloved, flee from idolatry (1 Cor. 10:1-14).

The astute Bible student will note from the above passage that the ancient Israelites had been “baptized” out of Egyptian bondage and “unto” Moses (10:1-4). But the Israelites fell away from God and turned to **idolatry** (10:5-10). When did those ancient peoples reject God? They were free from Egypt but felt as if they were all **alone** in the wilderness when Moses left them to ascend Mount Sinai to receive the Law (Num. 11:4-14; 1 Cor. 10:5-7). How terrible they thought their lives were! Why no one had **ever** had such trouble as they, and so they turned to idolatry for solace (1 Cor. 10:8-10)! Note carefully that, as the Jews of Jesus’ day (Luke 13:1-9), the ancient Israelites spoken of by Paul also thought that somehow God was to be blamed for their distress. They had a wrong concept of God.

That which happened to ancient Israel is an example for Christians (1 Cor. 10:11). When a Christian gets to thinking that his problems are greater than any other human's, that Christian has entered the sinful world of idolatry! That Christian thinks he stands alone in his trouble and, because of such erroneous thinking, is in need of taking "heed lest he fall" (10:12). Such self-pity arises from self-adoration, a type of idolatry!

The Christian should bear in mind that any trial in life can happen to anyone, for "There hath no temptation taken you, but such as is common to man" (10:13a). The word "temptation," in the original, is **peirosmos** and has the primary meaning of an outward trial, which the context here demands.¹⁵ A proper concept of God will help one realize that God is "faithful" and will not allow one to be tested "above that ye are able" (1 Cor. 10:13b). That is, God never puts on anyone any trial, for all men have common trials, and no one problem is greater than any other—unless one thinks so highly of self (self-idolatry) that one surmises that his trials are greater and somehow God has deserted him! Such self-idolatry must be put behind (10:14). God has never left His people and never will, and such knowledge is the "way of escape" in order to bear life's trials (10:13c).

As the barren fig tree in Jesus' parable, so many live fruitless lives because they blame everything and everyone for their trials. Or, as the Jews of Jesus' day, they are so full of self-esteem that their concept of their position with God is blurred. Spence notes on Luke 13:6:

It is not an uncommon practice to plant fig trees at the corners of vineyards, thus utilizing every available spot of ground. Still, the Lord's choice of a fig tree as the symbol of Israel, the chosen people, is at first sight strange. This image was no doubt selected to show those Pharisees and other Jews, proud of what they considered their

unassailable position as the elect of the Eternal, that, after all, the position they occupied was but that of a fig tree in the corner of the vineyard of the world—planted there and watched over so long as it promised to serve the Lord of the vineyard's purpose; if it ceased to do that; if it gave no further promise of fruit, then it would be ruthlessly cut down.¹⁶

On reading Spence above, one is reminded of Jesus' teaching that "every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit" (John 15:2). A barren fig tree certainly is good only for firewood.

The story, in fact, is often told of an imaginary conversation between a farmer and his fruit tree. The tree is not bearing fruit and the farmer asks why. "Well," says the tree, "I tried bearing fruit but it was so exhausting. Besides that, some fruit fell to the ground and rotted and, when there was ripe fruit, workers would come and damage my branches. And, no one ever thanked me for bearing fruit! So, Mr. Farmer, what do you expect?" The farmer replied, "I expect that you will make nice logs for my fire place!"

What is the equivalent of a "barren fig tree" when thinking of the spiritual condition of man? The unrepentant sinner is a fruitless being who takes up space in this world but is of no use to God or his fellow man (Luke 13:6-9). The unrepentant sinner either is trying to blame God or is so full of self-adoration he imagines he is unique above all others and only his problems are the great ones (cf. Rom. 3:23)!

The Lessons

First, God is still in charge of this world and has not left man without guidance, for God cares and does not bring any evil nor hurt on man (Luke 13:1-5; cf. Jas. 1:13-15).

People are slain and towers fall, but such is life in a world where man (Adam) opened the door to the tyranny of sin (Gen. 3). The key to repentance and trust in God is to refuse to give in to idolatrous self-adoration (1 Cor. 10:12-14). Life will test all, even Christians, but God is faithful and will never leave His children nor creation (Heb. 13:5-6).

Second, repentance is accomplished by man and is only motivated by God. God could hold Israel (the barren fig tree) responsible for her rejection of Him because Israel was obligated to repent and accept the Messiah (Luke 13:9). God was gracious to Israel, even to the extent of waiting “this year also,” but eventually God would condemn and destroy the rebellious nation (Matt. 23:38). God is not to be blamed when men fail to repent, and those who would hold God responsible need to repent (Luke 13:3-5)! The Bible teaches that **godly sorrow** causes repentance, and such is never to be regretted (2 Cor. 7:10b). Sorrow toward God over sin is much different from saying “I’m sorry” when one is caught in sin. The latter, worldly sorrow, never leads to repentance, for repentance is a change of one’s mind caused by grieving over sin against God and **deciding** to stop a life of sin (cf. Matt. 21:28-30). The result from such a mental decision will be a turning to God and a complete change of attitude and lifestyle (3:8). The fruitless fig tree, Israel, refused to repent. Therefore, she was to be destroyed, for she was useless.

Third, the reference to Israel as a **fig** tree is indicative of her relatively small place in relation to God’s great plan for the world. Israel occupied only a “corner” in God’s world “garden,” but she thought of herself as the cream of the crop in terms of her supposed superiority to the nations (cf. Jer. 7:4, 8-34). Paul wrote three chapters of Romans to explain to the Jews that God used them to bring Messiah, Whom they should accept, and did not bring Messiah to make the Jews world rulers (Rom. 9-11). Paul patiently

explained that, even when Israel was God's nation, not all in it were God's true Israel (9:6). The apostle further insisted that God had the right to choose whom He would use to work out His scheme of redeeming man (9:16). God's choices, according to Paul, did not interfere with the individuals so chosen pertaining to their own salvation (9:17-33). Israel was a barren fig tree by choice, not by Divine fiat.

A fourth lesson from the parable of the fruitless fig tree is that **both** the goodness and severity of God are motivating factors in man's repentance. Notice that the owner of the vineyard sought fruit for three years and that the owner suffered **increasing** disappointment (Luke 13:7). Sinners need to realize that refusing to repent and obey God treasures up "wrath against the day of wrath and the righteous judgment of God" (Rom. 2:5b). A fruitless tree is keeping some of its energy for itself and not giving its all to bear fruit. Just so are those who will not deny self; those who take from God and give nothing in return are very barren souls. (Matt. 16:24-26).

A fifth application comes from a parallel passage (Mark 11:13): "And seeing a fig tree afar off having leaves, he came, if haply he might find any thing thereon: and when he came to it, he found nothing but leaves; for the time of figs was not yet." A fig tree with leaves should at least have some "untimely figs," even though such fruit would be small. This particular fig tree had leaves, therefore representing itself as a fruit-bearer. Too many, perhaps, present themselves as Christians, but their lives are barren of spirituality and service. The fig tree mentioned by Mark 11:12 was cursed by the Lord and withered and died!

Conclusion

The fig tree had a long and storied history in Palestine. The plant became a proverb for long-lasting

prosperity and fruitful living. The “barren fig tree” represents the Jewish nation’s true nature before God (Luke 13:6). The owner of the vineyard represents the heavenly Father; the vinedresser represents Jesus the Christ; the vineyard is the world; the “fruitlessness” is a symbol of Israel’s rebellion and ultimate rejection of the Christ (13:6-9).

Israel, as do multitudes today, had long tried to blame God for her rebellion (Mic. 6:1-7). But God’s grace suffered long with her, as He tried to get her to love and respect Him (cf. Luke 13:8).

The lesson is simple. The impenitent who reject God will be condemned, but the penitent show themselves to be so by bearing the fruits of God’s teaching and the “fruit” of teaching others.

Endnotes

1 C. H. Dodd, **The Parables of the Kingdom** (New York: Scribner’s, 1961), p. 9.

2 See J. D. Crossan, **In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus** (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 94.

3 Eta Linneman, **Jesus of the Parables: Introduction and Exposition** (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), pp. 3-4. Linneman insists that these “conflicts”—for example, an unjust steward being commended (Luke 16:1-9)—take their origin from the reality of which Jesus was speaking.

4 **The Holy Bible**, King James Version (New York: World Bible Publishers). All Scripture references are to this version unless otherwise specified.

5 E. W. G. Masterman, “Fig-Trees,” **The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia**, Volume 2, ed. James Orr (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1939), p. 1108.

6 For example, see John L. Leedy, “Plants,” **Pictorial Bible Dictionary**, ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Nashville: Southwestern, 1974), p. 663.

7 Masterman, "Plants," p. 1109.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 H. D. M. Spence, "St. Luke," **The Pulpit Commentary**, Volume 2, eds. H. D. M. Spence & Joseph S. Exell (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans), p. 2.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Walter Bauer, "peirosmos," **A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature**, trans. & eds. William F. Arndt & F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 640. This meaning of outward trial is also James' usage (Jas. 1:2-3).

16 Spence, p. 2.

CHAPTER 5

The Parable Of The Builders

Paul Meacham, Jr.

Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it (Matt 7:24-27).¹

Introduction

THE PARABLE ASSIGNED THIS writer, like most of Jesus' parables, was given to illustrate one central point. That point, the main lesson of this passage, is found in Matthew 7:21. While the message here found seems to be simple and easily understood, Jesus strengthened the lesson by allowing them to see the fate of those who pay Him only lip service (7:22-23). The Master Teacher then drove home the point with the wonderful parable under consideration (7:24-27). In our allotted space, we will endeavor to define what a parable is, examine the lesson Jesus was teaching on this occasion, and analyze this foundational parable.

The Definition Of A Parable

A parable is defined as:

a short, simple story designed to communicate a spiritual truth, religious principle, or moral lesson; a figure of speech in which truth is illustrated by a comparison or example drawn from everyday experiences.²

For a parable to exist, there must be a heavenly or spiritual truth explained or illustrated by an easily understood earthly story. Hence we have the common definition of “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.” It was to this “simple story” method of teaching that Jesus turned more than thirty times in His recorded discourses.

The Background Of The Parable

The occasion of this teaching is the famous Sermon on the Mount. Our assigned text finds us very near the end of this great sermon where Jesus, having shocked them out of their senses³ with His teaching, warns them against being only a hearer and not a doer of His words. Because His message was so surprising to them, there would be a strong tendency to satisfy themselves with having heard His words, but without any commitment on their part to perform His words. Therefore, Jesus tells them, “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21).

Jesus is not here denying the fact that He is the King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 17:14; 19:16), nor is He chastising those who acknowledge Him as Lord. In John 13:13, Jesus said, “Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am.” Jesus did not then, nor could He ever, deny Himself (2 Tim. 2:13). He is Lord! He was elevated to that high and lofty position by the Father in heaven. In

Philippians 2:5-8 we see that Jesus humbled Himself, left the grandeur of heaven, came to the earth, and died for man. In keeping with God's promise to lift up those who humble themselves (Luke 18:14; Jas. 4:10), we see that "God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name" (Phil. 2:9). He Who humbled Himself most was exalted highest. He was exalted even to the point:

That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (2:10-11).

Since all **should** confess Jesus as the Lord, and everyone eventually **will** confess Jesus as Lord on the Judgment Day (Rom. 14:11-12), it is clearly understood that Jesus' lesson was not a prohibition against calling Him Lord.

Rather, our Lord and Master was warning all not to claim Him as their Lord if they were unwilling to follow Him in obedience. James gives us a similar warning by comparing one who hears but will not obey with a man who sees his physical faults in a mirror and goes on his way, ignoring the corrections that are needed (Jas. 1:23-24). Having seen ourselves in the mirror after eight hours of tossing and turning in the bed, we can all easily see the foolishness of such a practice in the physical realm. Yet, many build their lives around just such a policy in spiritual matters. James shows us the wise path in verse 25: "But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed." God provided for us the perfect mirror in which to examine our lives, the "law of liberty." However, examination (hearing) alone is insufficient. We must

continue in the dictates of that law (being a doer of the work) if we would be blessed in our deeds.

While hearing the words of Jehovah and claiming to be His people are good and needful things, without faithful obedience they have never been enough to please the Father. Ezekiel of old was told:

Also, thou son of man, the children of thy people still are talking against thee by the walls and in the doors of the houses, and speak one to another, every one to his brother, saying, Come, I pray you, and hear what is the word that cometh forth from the Lord. And they come unto thee as the people cometh, and they sit before thee as my people, and they hear thy words, but they will not do them: for with their mouth they shew much love, but their heart goeth after their covetousness. And, lo, thou art unto them as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument: for they hear thy words, but they do them not (Ezek. 33:30-32).

It seems evident that in many ways man changes very little. Many today still speak to one another about coming together to hear the Word of the Lord. Many still gather together as the people of God, showing much love with their lips. But, as in the day of Ezekiel, and the days of our Lord's sojourn, their heart is far from Jehovah (Matt. 15:8). Many are willing to hear the Word and claim the Christ, but few are willing to obey, despite the teaching of the Master.

Jesus then augmented His lesson by warning forgetful hearers of the fate awaiting those who refuse to do the Father's will:

Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then

will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity (Matt. 7:22-23).

Though great swelling words of accomplishments and unremitting claims of Divine approbation are made, the Savior plainly and definitively denies having any part in the actions of those who will not humble their hearts and bow to His will. For them awaits the same fate of the slothful servant, who is sent to punishment in shame (25:30). Would we not find a wiser path in following the steps of Noah?: “Thus did Noah; according to all that God commanded him, so did he” (Gen. 6:22). Would we not find greater reward following the example of Moses?: “Thus did Moses: according to all that the Lord commanded him, so did he” (Exod. 40:16). Will we not tread the way of the apostles, observing all things that the Lord commanded them (Matt. 28:20)? If we will choose the life of obedience, then we can rest peacefully, well assured in the power of our Savior’s blood (1 John 1:7).

The Meaning Of The Parable

Having taught the intended lesson and given a strong warning to those tempted to reject the Christ and try their own path, Jesus then illustrates the lesson with this beloved parable. As is often the case, the Master Teacher brings forth power from simplicity. It is the everyday familiarity with common-sense building practices that captures our attention and makes it impossible to forget the lesson proclaimed. Since our earliest days of singing, “The wise man built his house upon a rock,” and seeing everything from tool sheds to skyscrapers placed on foundations, we have all recognized the wisdom of choosing a stable and firm foundation before building further. Jesus here forces us to apply that same standard of common sense to building our spiritual lives upon His Word.

In Matthew 7:24, we are introduced to a builder. He was a wise builder, so determined by the judgment and designation of the Lord. Luke's parallel account of this parable tells us he "**digged deep**, and laid the foundation on a rock" (Luke 6:48, emp. mine throughout, PM). From this we know that being a wise builder required concerted effort. But we immediately learn that the extra effort was worth it because "the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock" (Matt 7:25). Anyone who has ever built anything more complex than a birdhouse knows the nagging anxiety that accompanies construction. A degree of doubt lingers until your structure proves itself able to withstand the elements. How comforting it would be to know in advance that the product of one's labors would stand the coming tests!

We are then introduced to another builder. With equal clarity Jesus brands him as a foolish builder for he "built his house upon the sand" (Matt 7:26). This was an act of such utter folly that Luke refers to the builder as "a man that **without a foundation** built an house upon the earth" (Luke 6:49). To choose the shifting, unstable sand for a foundation was tantamount to building with no foundation at all. The imprudence of such a decision is quickly seen because "the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it" (Matt 7:27). Such an act was the height of foolishness, for the structure was destined for failure and all the material and time invested was lost. This builder would have been better off to have never built at all.

The majesty of our Lord's teaching can be seen in the clarity this parable holds for all. We of 21st-century America are moved by the power of this presentation, understanding fully the message of our Master. And for those of Jesus' day:

how lively must this imagery have been to an audience accustomed to the fierceness of an Eastern tempest, and the suddenness and completeness with which it sweeps everything unsteady before it!⁴

If we learned nothing more than the primary message, “blessed are they that hear the word of God, **and keep it**” (Luke 11:28), we would gain much. Christ’s illustration, however, glistens like a string of rare pearls, offering us much more than just this central theme. In our remaining space we will mention only three.

First, we notice that both the wise man and the foolish man were builders. Likewise, it is true that all who are alive today are builders. Those who have already passed from this life “rest from their labours; and their works do follow them” (Rev. 14:13); they will be judged according to those works, whether good or bad (2 Cor. 5:10). We can and must choose what kind of life we build, but that all must build is seen in that all must give an account (Rom. 14:12).

Second, we see that the work of both men was assaulted by storms. Just as it was common for sudden rains to cross over mountains and through valleys, all in this life are subject to unexpected tragedy and calamity. Just as the rivers and streams of Palestine would suddenly swell and sweep away houses, life’s trials and assaults often destroy those who trust in unstable foundations. It is for this cause that God laid “in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation” (Isa. 28:16). The One Who is “able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think” (Eph. 3:20) gave us not only a foundation, but a tried, precious, and sure foundation.

Finally, we note that, while some will fail, it is not necessary that I fail. Jesus has already invited: “Take my

yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:29-30). While many choose to fret and fuss as though the yoke of the Lord would chafe, we have been assured that “his commandments are not grievous” (1 John 5:3). In fact, they are a delight (Psm. 119:47, 174) that should draw us ever nearer to our Savior.

Some are deluded into believing that their hearing of the Word, and claiming of the Christ, will save them, but John openly declares, “Little children, let no man deceive you: he that **doeth righteousness** is righteous, even as he is righteous” (1 John 3:7). It is high time that some of us stop satisfying ourselves with “talking the talk” and start “walking the walk.”

Endnotes

1 All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Bible, unless otherwise stated.

2 **Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary** (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986).

3 “Comments on Matt. 7:28,” **Vincent’s Word Studies of the New Testament**, Electronic Database (Biblesoft, 1997).

4 “Comments on Matt. 7:27,” **Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary**, Electronic Database (Biblesoft, 1997).

CHAPTER 6

The Parable Of The Pounds

David Jones

Commendation

WE CONTINUE TO BE grateful to God for the church of Christ which meets in Southaven, MS. We are thankful for the invitation to participate in such a profitable and powerful lectureship. We respect and revere the godly eldership in Southaven. Countless souls are reached and reassured by the evangelistic efforts put forth on a continual basis from this place. It can be said of Southaven, as Paul said of Thessalonica:

For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing (1 Thess. 1:8).

The efforts of this good church has sounded forth the Word all around the world. We also are grateful to work with the fine director of this lectureship, B. J. Clarke, and his good family. We are grateful for his friendship and the fellowship we enjoy in Christ. We are thankful to have worked in the same area as brother Clarke for the past decade. His efforts in Desoto county have helped stay the tide of liberalism. It is good also to work with Sean and

Anita Hochdorf. We have made several mission trips to Russia together and have enjoyed our times as we served God together.

Introduction Of The Parable

The subject before us at this time is the parable of the pounds, recorded in Luke 19:11-27. Jesus taught many lessons, incorporating the use of parables in order to do so. We would profit greatly by observing the Master Teacher and His methods. As we begin, we notice some background material to parables.

First, we ask the question, "What is a parable?" In Mark 4:30 we have an inspired definition: "And he said, Whereunto shall we liken the kingdom of God? or with what comparison shall we **compare** it?" (emp. mine, DJ). The word "compare" is defined by Strong's as: "to throw alongside, i.e. (reflex.) to reach a place, or (fig.) to liken:—arrive, compare. 'to throw beside.'"¹ Strong's also defines the word "parable": "a similitude ('parable'), i.e. (symbol.) fictitious narrative (of common life conveying a moral), apothegm or adage:—comparison, figure, parable, proverb."²

Someone has said a parable is "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning." Perhaps this simple definition most completely expresses the thought of a parable. Parables were things with which people were familiar. They were taken from ordinary, well-known illustrations. They were taken from occurrences with which every one was familiar. Parables were either actual occurrences or, else, illustrations which could have really happened. Therefore, though something is a parable, it could have actually happened. Jesus never in any way taught an untruth. This principle is important for the Bible student to remember as he correctly interprets the Bible.

For example, the account recorded in Luke 16:19-31 must be considered with this principle in mind. There is a religious group, the so-called “Jehovah’s Witnesses,” which claims the account mentioned is “only” a parable, and, therefore, does not prove there is a place of eternal punishment. The premises upon which they operate says that evil men will be annihilated at the judgment, suffering only a moment of pain. However, the Bible repeatedly teaches an eternal punishment awaits the wicked (Matt. 25:46; John 5:28-29). We will not elaborate on the details, as this will be covered in another lesson. We note it because it shows that we need to understand the illustration used by Jesus was either an actual account of two men who literally lived, or it is a parable. If it is a parable, Jesus had to use something real as His foundation. So whether the people mentioned literally lived, or Jesus used them as an illustration, the lesson taught **could have** literally happened. Thus, it proves in principle that there is a place of eternal punishment just as much as there is a place of eternal paradise.

Second, the Bible student must use care as he interprets parables. Vine denotes two dangers in interpreting parables: (1) Ignoring the most important features; (2) Trying to-make all the details mean something.³ Often people will inject more into a parable than the Lord meant. We must concentrate our efforts to understand the main point the Lord tried to express.

Third, we need to understand there were four main reasons for parables. Number one—to reveal truth (teach the unknown by the known). This was the most familiar method used by the Lord. There were many things relative to the coming kingdom which Jesus taught by the use of parables. Jesus was truly interested in trying to get the Jews to understand. The call of the Gospel was emphasized often. For example, Jesus emphasized the need for laborers

in the kingdom: “For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard” (Matt. 20:1). The Master Teacher also explained the growth of the kingdom by the use of parables in the parable of the mustard seed:

Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: Which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof (13:31-32).

In this parable the fact that the kingdom would have a small beginning, but grow to provide many blessings, is shown. The manner as to how the kingdom will extend is explained in the parable of leaven (13:33). The reception of the Gospel is shown to be the basis of the growth of the kingdom (13:3ff).

The second reason why Jesus used parables was to embalm truth (make it easy to remember). He wanted His listeners to remember what He said, so He used a method by which they could relate earthly things to heavenly truths. Illustrations always cause us to be able to see and remember things more clearly. Perhaps when His listeners would see a sower sowing, they would remember the lesson of the power of the Gospel. The same would have been true about the fishnet, wheat and tares, etc.

A third reason as to why Jesus used parables was to conceal truth from those who would abuse it. The design of the Gospel was to hide it from the self-righteous and self-wise but to reveal it to the sincere in heart (babes):

In that hour Jesus rejoiced in spirit, and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth,

that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes: even so, Father; for so it seemed good in thy sight (Luke 10:21).

God desires that we make an effort to know and understand His Word. If we are lifted up with pride in ourselves, we will not humble ourselves before Him, His throne, and His word. Jesus taught this principle in the sermon on the mount: "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you" (Matt 7:6). Swine find no sensual or physical satisfaction in pearls and, therefore, would turn and rend the ones feeding them because they do not satisfy their need. The same is true relative to Bible study. Thus, Jesus incorporated a teaching method which caused the self-righteous to miss the truth and the sincere to find it. This is emphasized again:

At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes (11:25).

When asked by His disciples as to why He spoke in parables, Jesus told them this very point (13:10-16). He went on in that text to inform them that this was spoken by the prophet Isaiah and fulfilled in those of Jesus' day. Jesus did not blind them: they just closed their eyes and did not want to see the truth:

But though he had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on him: That the saying of Esaias the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spake, Lord, who hath believed our report? and to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed? Therefore they could not believe,

because that Esaias said again, He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart; that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them. These things said Esaias, when he saw his glory, and spake of him (John 12:37-41).

Paul spoke of the fact that, if we do not love and believe the truth, we will believe a lie:

And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness (2 Thess. 2:10-12).

The fourth reason why Jesus spoke in parables was to cause one to acknowledge truth without realizing at the time that it applies to him. The classic example of this was the parable spoken by the prophet Nathan, which revealed the sin of David with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12:1ff). When David heard the parable, he was made aware of sin and he spoke that realization, correctly judging himself, although at the time he did not recognize himself as the one at fault. In Jesus' day He spoke of the Jews' rejection of Him, speaking a parable which caused them to see the truth applied to them first. As we read Matthew 21:33-46, we see that Jesus showed them their fate before they realized it applied to them.

The Parable Of The Pounds

The parable of the pounds is sometimes confused with the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30). The parable of the pounds differs from the talents in several ways: (1) The parable of the pounds was spoken en route to Jerusalem at Jericho; the parable of the talents was spoken

on the Mount of Olives after His entry; (2) The parable of the pounds was spoken to the multitude; the parable of the talents was spoken to the innermost circle of His followers; (3) The value of a pound would be about \$17.50, the value of a talent of silver would be about \$1,642.50 and a talent of gold about \$26,280; and (4) The same number of pounds was given to each servant, while a different number of talents were given to each servant.⁴

With these principles in mind, we turn our attention to the parable at hand. We will notice the circumstances and context of the parable of the pounds. We will first analyze the text and then make some modern-day applications of these precepts.

Exposition Of The Parable

Jesus came from heaven with a mission to die for mankind. In fact the Hebrews writer gives us His mission in one verse: “But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man” (Heb. 2:9). Once He was baptized in the River Jordan by John, Jesus pressed toward the mark of fulfilling the mission of His Father:

For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me. And this is the Father’s will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day (John 6:38-39).

He chose twelve men to carry His “good news” to the world. He spent three-and-one-half years instructing and preparing them for that mission. Yet these same disciples had their minds on an earthly, military kingdom, expecting Jesus to restore the glory to Israel they had enjoyed during the reigns of David and particularly Solomon. Even after

His resurrection, they still had their minds set on this earthly kingdom: “When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). It is little wonder that the majority of the people also had a misconception about the nature of the kingdom. Jesus made it crystal clear about His kingdom as He spoke to Pilate:

Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence (John 18:36).

In the context of the parable of the pounds, we read: “And as they heard these things, he added and spake a parable, because he was nigh to Jerusalem, and because they thought that the kingdom of God should immediately appear” (Luke 19:11). Earlier, Luke had recorded that Jesus had set His face steadfastly toward Jerusalem: “And it came to pass, when the time was come that he should be received up, he stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem” (9:51). Boles says of this verse, “Jesus Himself with fixedness of purpose set His face against the difficulties and dangers that would befall Him.”⁵ McGarvey says of this incident:

His going to Jerusalem is described as attended with a special effort, because from that time forth Jerusalem was to occupy the position of headquarters, as Capernaum had done, and His withdrawals and returns would be with regard to it.⁶

Jesus had a mission to fulfill and now He was in the final stages of that mission. Although it would be about six months from the events recorded in Luke 9:51 before He was actually crucified, He was steadfastly looking toward

that moment. So from that time till the parable of the pounds, Jesus was set to go to Jerusalem and fulfill the mission God the Father had given Him. Now it is time to enter the city in triumph and then to die the terrible death on the cross.

According to Luke, He spoke the parable because He was nigh to Jerusalem and to the fulfilling of His mission. He was about to become the appeasing sacrifice God's justice demanded. Paul writes of this sacrifice and its importance in the book of Romans:

Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus (Rom. 3:24-26).

God's justice was satisfied when His only begotten Son gave His life for sinful man. God can now justify men who will obey His will and contact the redeeming blood of His Son. John writes about the work of Christ in redemption:

My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:1-2).

Jesus is our Advocate and Propitiation for our sins—that is, He is the One Who comes to our aid and the One Who appeased God's justice for us. His being nigh to Jerusalem meant He was nigh to fulfilling that purpose.

Also, He spake the parable because the people believed His kingdom would come when He entered into Jerusalem. They believed He would ride in and take over the throne, reigning on a literal throne in Jerusalem. We will expose this error in more detail later, but here we will note the fact that Jesus spake this to explain in parables that His kingdom would not immediately be fulfilled: “He said therefore, A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom, and to return” (Luke 19:12). Note, He said the nobleman went into a far country to receive the kingdom. The Jews thought He was going to Jerusalem to receive it, but had they listened as they should, they would have realized it would take place somewhere other than Jerusalem. Had they listened to Daniel, they would have realized this:

I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed (Dan. 7:13-14).

They should have been looking for a day when Jesus would go to the Father and there receive His kingdom. At the very least, they should not have looked for Him to establish a military kingdom in the city of Jerusalem. However, they paid no attention to the prophets whom the Father sent to prepare the people for the coming of His Son.

The illustration Jesus used of the nobleman going into a far country to receive his kingdom was one with which the people would have been familiar. H. Daniel Denham provided some valuable material relative to this fact, as he wrote:

Herod the Great received his throne by such means. Also Archelaus, the Son of Herod, made a trip to Rome to seek the help of the Roman Senate in enforcing the will of his deceased father. Archelaus was thoroughly detested by the people, who besought the Emperor (Augustus) to not make him king. Archelaus was cruel and vindictive. At the first Passover following his ascension, he had about 3,000 subjects massacred. In the end, Augustus gave the kingdom to him, though he withheld from him the official title of “king” borne by his father. The palace of Archelaus and a great aqueduct were in Jericho, and perhaps served to provide vivid reminders of the historic illustration (cf., Josephus, *Antiquities* xvii, p.340).⁷

The parable also teaches what Jesus demands of His disciples while He is away: “And he called his ten servants, and delivered them ten pounds, and said unto them, Occupy till I come” (Luke 19:13). Brother Boles comments about the “pounds”: “The original Greek for pounds is ‘minas,’ and was equal to about one hundred drachmas, or between sixteen and eighteen dollars.”⁸ The amount committed to each servant in this parable is far less than committed to the servants in the parable of the talents. Brother Boles says:

In the parable of the talents the Lord is transferring to his servants his entire property, while in the parable of the pounds he is putting into the hands of his servants only a small amount to test their faithfulness. All prominent men in Rome had many servants; sometimes they had a servant to do each particular task. This nobleman called “ten” of his servants to him and committed to them this trust.⁹

The number “ten” stands for an infinitely greater number, such use of numbers being common among the Hebrews. “His citizens...” mentioned in the next verse (Luke 19:14) were also his, and

under obligations to acknowledge this rule; but the servants were especially “his” in the sense of being redeemed by him. The citizens were his because he had created them and was their rightful lord.¹⁰

Verse fourteen coincides with the history of Archelaus, as his subjects hated him and did not want him to rule over them: “But his citizens hated him, and sent a message after him, saying, We will not have this man to reign over us” (Luke 19:14). This was also the case with Jesus. There were many who rejected Jesus, and, eventually, He was delivered, because of envy and hatred, to be killed. Jesus said Himself: “But this cometh to pass, that the word might be fulfilled that is written in their law, They hated me without a cause” (John 15:25). Brother Boles comments on this verse:

Jesus here could recite history with which the people were familiar. It is worthy of note to observe that this declaration was twice made by the Jews: “We have no king but Caesar,” and “Write not, The King of the Jews” (John 19:15, 21).¹¹

The Jews continued to persecute the church and eventually suffered the destruction of their beloved city at the hands of the Romans. Paul commented on the Jews’ rejection:

Then Paul and Barnabas waxed bold, and said, It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46).

The parable also teaches the fact the Lord will return, and each servant will be called into account for the use of his talent or faithfulness:

And it came to pass, that when he was returned, having received the kingdom, then he commanded these servants to be called unto him, to whom he had given the money, that he might know how much every man had gained by trading (Luke 19:15).

By right of noble birth and appointment, the nobleman had the right to call his servants into account. Jesus has the right to call His servants into account because of His Deity. Note also the fact that each man was to have been active, which would have been demonstrated by his trading of the money left him. Those who had been faithful and active were rewarded according to their faithfulness (19:17-19). One was brought before him who had wasted his opportunity to trade by wrapping his pound in a napkin and laying it aside. He was condemned because he did not use it to the growth of the nobleman's kingdom. The point of the parable is emphasized here. The one who has neglected to use his pound, no matter how small, shall lose it, but the one who diligently uses what is entrusted to him, to him shall more be entrusted.

At the end of His teaching, Jesus speaks to His enemies, condemning them for their unbelief. The destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 by the Romans certainly fits this teaching. The end of time when Jesus returns to reward or reject based on man's works, fulfills this ultimately.

Application Of The Parable

As the Bible student examines the parable of the pounds, there are several lessons which can be gleaned for our day and age.

First, we understand from the parable that the kingdom of Christ is not to be an earthly kingdom. It is a spiritual kingdom over which Jesus now reigns. Jesus

declared before His ascension: “And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth” (Matt. 28:18). Therefore, Jesus now reigns as King in His kingdom. Peter affirmed such on the Day of Pentecost:

This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses. Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear. For David is not ascended into the heavens: but he saith himself, The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, Until I make thy foes thy footstool. Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:32-36).

Jesus now reigns in His kingdom as Head of the church. Paul taught such to the Ephesians:

Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all (Eph. 1:20-23).

Peter likewise wrote of this fact: “Who is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God; angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto him” (1 Pet. 3:22).

Jesus went to His Father and received His kingdom (Dan. 7:13-14). The denominations have severely missed the truth because many of them teach Jesus will receive His kingdom upon His return to earth. He will **not** come back and set up an earthly kingdom, as that would be

impossible for Him to do. He can not be a king on earth, according to Jeremiah 22:30: "Thus saith the Lord, Write ye this man childless, a man that shall not prosper in his days: for no man of his seed shall prosper, sitting upon the throne of David, and ruling any more in Judah." As the Bible student reads Matthew's record of Jesus' lineage, he finds Jesus in the line of Coniah, therefore rendering it impossible for Jesus to sit on an earthly throne (Matt. 1:11-12). Jesus likewise cannot be a priest upon earth, seeing He was of the tribe of Judah and the Levites were the priestly tribe. The Hebrews writer confirms this:

For the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law. For he of whom these things are spoken pertaineth to another tribe, of which no man gave attendance at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord sprang out of Judah; of which tribe Moses spake nothing concerning priesthood (Heb. 7:12-14).

The Bible reveals that Jesus is our High Priest today, and this would be impossible if He were on earth (3:1; 4:15).

Second, the parable teaches the necessity of humbling ourselves before the kingship of Jesus. The enemies were those who would not submit to the rule of the nobleman and those who will not humble themselves before God are His enemies today. James wrote: "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up" (Jas. 4:10). Too many want to lift themselves up instead of doing it the Lord's way. When we try and be friends of the world and of the Lord, we become His enemy (4:4). Those today who deny Christ, whether by mouth or manner of life, are His enemies and this parable teaches that destruction shall be their end.

Third, this parable teaches the necessity of each one diligently using what the Lord has given him to the glory of the King. It teaches we will give account of our work on earth. Paul wrote:

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad. Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men; but we are made manifest unto God; and I trust also are made manifest in your consciences (2 Cor. 5:10-11).

Each person will stand and give account of his life. This judgment will be based on the word spoken by Jesus: “He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day” (John 12:48). Judgment Day will also be based on our works:

And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works (Rev. 20:12).

Those who are not diligently working will be eternally punished.

We are to diligently add the “Christian graces” to our lives if we desire an entrance into the eternal phase of the kingdom (2 Pet. 1:5-12). We are to show diligence to the end (Heb. 6:11). Our lack of diligence can make us fall short of the grace of God (12:15). Peter exhorted his readers to be found diligent at the end: “Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless” (2 Pet. 3:14). In order to be diligent, one must love the Lord with all his heart (Matt. 22:37-40). One must then put the kingdom first (6:33). One must work and worship as directed by God through His Word (John 4:23-24; Eph 2:10).

Summation Of The Parable

We learn from the Master Teacher the importance of diligently working in His kingdom. We need to see the importance of being a member of the kingdom and for being active and alive in our work. May God help us as we seek Him first.

Endnotes

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CHAPTER 7

The Parable Of The Persistent Widow

Bobby Liddell

Introduction

THE FAITHFUL BRETHREN WHICH are the Southaven church of Christ deserve the highest of commendations for their many good works which glorify God (Matt. 5:16), among which is their annual lectureship. The quality, which results from their diligent efforts, is such that every brother and sister would benefit from these lectures, whether attending in person or receiving them in the available formats—book, tape, and CD. The countless hours of labor contributed by the Southaven members prompt sincere gratitude from all who are blessed by the **POWER** Lectures. Thus, the elders, preachers, and all the members of Southaven deserve the deepest appreciation which we are able to convey.

The parable of the persistent widow is one of the parables which only Luke records. Luke records several parables of Jesus on the subject of prayer, and, more than the other writers, observes Jesus praying.¹ This parable begins with Jesus' stated purpose of encouraging men "always to pray, and not to faint":

And he spake a parable unto them to this end,
that men ought always to pray, and not to faint;

Saying, There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, neither regarded man: And there was a widow in that city; and she came unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversary. And he would not for a while: but afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man; Yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me. And the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge saith. And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth? (Luke 18:1-8).

The Parable's Background

Commonly, each city would have a judge or judges who would, as this parable depicts, among other things, settle disputes between citizens. Jethro advised Moses:

Moreover thou shalt provide out of all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them, to be rulers of thousands, and rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens: And let them judge the people at all seasons: and it shall be, that every great matter they shall bring unto thee, but every small matter they shall judge: so shall it be easier for thyself, and they shall bear the burden with thee (Exod. 18:21-22).

God proclaimed the need for judges and specified their actions must be right and righteous. Let the reader take note of the following passages which plainly show God's will was for judges to exercise just judgment, without respect of persons, and without request for financial gain through bribes (cf. 1 Sam. 8:3; Psm. 82:2; Isa. 1:23; Mic. 3:11; 7:3):

The judges were forbidden to take bribes and to pervert justice. Ex. 23:6-9; Lev. 19:15; Deut. 1:16-17.²

Judges and officers shalt thou make thee in all thy gates, which the Lord thy God giveth thee, throughout thy tribes: and they shall judge the people with just judgment. Thou shalt not wrest judgment; thou shalt not respect persons, neither take a gift: for a gift doth blind the eyes of the wise, and pervert the words of the righteous. That which is altogether just shalt thou follow, that thou mayest live, and inherit the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee (Deut. 16:18-20).

And he set judges in the land throughout all the fenced cities of Judah, city by city, And said to the judges, Take heed what ye do: for ye judge not for man, but for the Lord, who is with you in the judgment. Wherefore now let the fear of the Lord be upon you; take heed and do it: for there is no iniquity with the Lord our God, nor respect of persons, nor taking of gifts (2 Chron. 19:5-7).

Then his master shall bring him unto the judges; he shall also bring him to the door, or unto the door post; and his master shall bore his ear through with an awl; and he shall serve him for ever...

If men strive, and hurt a woman with child, so that her fruit depart from her, and yet no mischief follow: he shall be surely punished, according as the woman's husband will lay upon him; and he shall pay as the judges determine....

If the thief be not found, then the master of the house shall be brought unto the judges, to see whether he have put his hand unto his neighbour's goods. For all manner of trespass, whether it be for ox, for ass, for sheep, for raiment, or for any manner of lost thing which another challengeth to be his, the cause of both parties shall come before the judges; and whom the judges shall condemn, he shall pay double unto his neighbour (Exod. 21:6, 22; 22:8-9).

If there be a controversy between men, and they come unto judgment, that the judges may judge them; then they shall justify the righteous, and condemn the wicked (Deut. 25:1).

Especially were the judges to ensure that the poor, oppressed, and downtrodden, such as fatherless and widows, were recipients of righteous judgment (Psm. 68:5; Prov. 31:9; Isa. 1:17). God has always specified His interest in the care of widows:

Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child (Exod. 22:22).

Thou shalt not pervert the judgment of the stranger, nor of the fatherless; nor take a widow's raiment to pledge: But thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in Egypt, and the Lord thy God redeemed thee thence: therefore I command thee to do this thing.

When thou cuttest down thine harvest in thy field, and hast forgot a sheaf in the field, thou shalt not go again to fetch it: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow: that the Lord thy God may bless thee in all the work of thine hands. When thou beatest thine olive tree, thou shalt not go over the boughs again: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow. When thou gatherest the grapes of thy vineyard, thou shalt not glean it afterward: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow (Deut. 24:17-21).

Cursed be he that perverteth the judgment of the stranger, fatherless, and widow. And all the people shall say, Amen (27:19).

Thus saith the Lord; Execute ye judgment and righteousness, and deliver the spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor: and do no wrong, do no violence to the stranger, the fatherless, nor the widow, neither shed innocent blood in this place (Jer. 22:3).

And I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those that oppress the

hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not me, saith the Lord of hosts (Mal. 3:5).

Jesus condemned the scribes and Pharisees with a scathing rebuke because they “devour widows’ houses” (Mark 12:40; Matt. 23:14). Understandably, one of the tests of “pure religion” is caring for the “fatherless and widows in their affliction” (Jas. 1:27).

The People Of The Parable

The proud judge, who “feared not God, neither regarded man” (Luke 18:2, 4), was probably a civil authority in the city who had been appointed by the Romans (under whose control the Jews lived) or by Herod: thus, he was not a “Jewish judge”³:

He is not only known by others as one who neither fears God nor regards man, but he absolutely glories in these things himself as if they constituted a title of greatness.⁴

He was “the judge of unrighteousness” and, as such, had neither love nor consideration for his fellow man.⁵ Certainly, if one does not fear God, neither will he regard man as he should (Matt. 22:37-40). Therefore, the unjust judge had no regard for the widow, for he had no regard for God, nor for God’s law which protected the widow.

The poor, pitiable widow sought help from the unjust judge, saying to him, “Avenge me of my adversary”: “The petitioner was a woman and a widow, the latter being in the East a synonym for hopelessness.”⁶ Though she sought to be avenged, she did not seek revenge.⁷ Her course of action was to handle the problem lawfully. She was not seeking a spiteful, malicious vengeance, but justice and deliverance from

the more powerful one who oppressed her, and had forced her into the grievous situation which was now hers.

The Problem

Though judges were not to take bribes, to pervert judgment, nor to judge with respect to persons, this judge seems to have been one whose character would have allowed him to do all these without hesitation. He is the picture of self-serving corruption: “The thought of being an instrument of God’s justice did not enter his mind or his heart.”⁸ Yet to him the poor widow would go to plead her case. Our Lord’s depiction of such an extremely unrighteous man only drives home the point of the seeming hopelessness of the widow’s plight in her quest for justice and deliverance.

The widow was, obviously, weak and poor, with no family, no funds, and no hope of rescue through her social or financial positions. She was:

weak so that she could not compel him to do her justice—and poor, so that she could not supply him with any motive, why for her sake he should brave, it might be, the resentment of formidable adversaries.⁹

She had an adversary who oppressed her to the point she sought out the judge, but she did not take matters into her own hands. In addition, she had to deal with the corruptness of the judge. The widow could not do for herself what had to be done. Though she did not have money to bribe the “unjust” judge, she used her legal recourse to come before the judge—even though he was unjust.

Usually, the fear of God hereafter influences men to do right in time. But this man feared not God. He was an atheist. Usually, deference to public opinion somewhat constrains men to do right. But this judge “regarded not man.” The case seemed hopeless.¹⁰

The Persistence Of The Widow

The judge at first refused to give her case the hearing it deserved or to render a favorable verdict. Her pitiable condition worsened with every denial from him. No doubt, one in her circumstance would wonder, "Is the judge listening? Does he care? Will I ever get the relief I seek?" In spite of it all, she did not give up. In her continual coming, as verse seven implies, she "cried day and night." Yes, she was poor, and she was pitiable, but she was persistent. She just would not give up and would not take "No" for an answer (cf. Matt. 15:21-28). So she came again and again with the same request each time, appearing before the reprehensible reprobate who, alone, had the authority to save her from her sad situation. Through all her trials and her subsequent cries for relief which, for a while, went unanswered, she did not become discouraged. Her persistence brought her that which she sought.

Jesus taught His disciples how to pray and followed His instruction with an account of the persistence of one like the widow, the "importunate friend." His point, again, was to keep on asking, seeking, and knocking:

And it came to pass, that, as he was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, one of his disciples said unto him, Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples. And he said unto them, When ye pray, say, Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so in earth. Give us day by day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. And he said unto them, Which of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say unto him, Friend, lend me three loaves; For a friend of mine in his journey is come to me, and I have nothing to set before him? And he from within shall answer and say, Trouble me not: the door is now

shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give thee. I say unto you, Though he will not rise and give him, because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him as many as he needeth. And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? or if he ask a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent? Or if he shall ask an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him? (Luke 11:1-13).

The Persuasion Of The Judge

The judge heard, acted, and avenged the widow. His actions were not taken because he cared about her—for he regarded not man. He was not interested in helping the poor widow, out of pity for her, but he wanted to be rid of her, to get her out of his hair. His concern was not in obeying God's will, in caring for widows—for he feared not God. Though his actions were right, his motive (which he stated) was wrong. His was a self-serving motive: "How many actions which appear good have neither the love of God, nor that of our neighbour, but only self-love of the basest kind, for their principle and motive!"¹¹ Some do good things from wrong motives. For example, some do good in order to be seen of men (Matt. 23:5). Jesus said, "They have their reward" (6:5). Others do good for personal gain alone, such as the man who makes a contribution to the treasury of the Lord's church just because he needs a tax deduction.

Though the judge was not concerned about her plight, about obeying God in doing God's will, or about any other good cause, he was concerned for himself:

And he would not for a while: but afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man; Yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me (Luke 18:4-5).

Interestingly, “weary me,” or “wear me out,” means literally to “give me a black eye.” This does not indicate the widow was likely to do him bodily harm. She was not going to attack him and bruise him physically. He was not afraid of being beaten by her. The meaning is that he would suffer as a result of her persistence, and his standing would be harmed (that is, her continual coming would work to destroy his reputation).¹²

The Point Of The Parable

“The great truth which our Savior designed to teach is what we ought to endeavor to find.”¹³ What is the great truth of this parable? Men should pray—and not faint—not give up (cf. 2 Cor. 4:16; Job 1:21; Gal. 6:9). As Jesus said, “Men ought always to pray”:

The word “always” must not be understood in respect of time, as if it meant continuously, but at all times, in the sense of under all circumstances, however apparently adverse, when it might seem as if an answer could not come, and we would therefore be in danger of “fainting” or becoming weary.¹⁴

There is an implication in this verse that men cease to pray.¹⁵

However, the “elect” must not, for any reason, give up praying. God will hear the cries of His children:

The inference from the parable is not that we shall be heard because we persevere in prayer; but, rather, that we should persevere in prayer even when the answer appears to be long

delayed, because it is God to whom we are praying, and we know that he is always willing to bless, and will ultimately give to us that which is best.¹⁶

Jesus said, “Hear what the unjust judge saith,” or, “Listen to the judge.” The judge said he answered the widow’s cry to keep her from troubling him further. Again, he did not care about the widow and was not sympathetic toward her. However, if a widow, without power, money, or influence, could bring about this resolution by her persistence, by not giving up, by not becoming discouraged, think how effectual will be the prayers of the elect to the Righteous Judge, God the Father. God will answer our cries because He loves us. The unjust judge acted because of the persistence of the widow. While the judge was proud of his disregard for God and man, God is One Who cares and is concerned about justice. It is not that God must be hounded into action, forced to answer prayer, or that He is unwilling to grant that which the elect need and request. The Bible says, “Ye have not, because ye ask not” (Jas. 4:2):

[I]t is not that insistence in prayer is the cause of its answer, but the certainty of that which is asked for should lead to continuance in prayer, even when all around seems to forbid the hope of answer.¹⁷

Nor is it the case that prayers are answered because of an incessant and vain repetition (Matt. 6:7).

Prayer helps us to realize our dependence upon God and, when offered properly, is an attestation of this recognition. Many are our adversaries, including the devil and all who serve him (1 Pet. 5:8). In the face of adversity, opposition, persecution, and seeming hopelessness, what shall we do? When our faith is tried, where shall we go? Shall our faith waver, or shall we be divided in heart, “a double minded man”?:

My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing. If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord. A double minded man is unstable in all his ways (Jas. 1:2-8).

Situations may wear upon us, but we dare not give up. God will answer our prayers. Our just God will answer and avenge according to the prayers of His children. He is not uncaring (1 Pet. 5:7; Jas. 5:16; 2 Thess. 3:1-2). Though the answer seems sometimes to be delayed, we know God is listening to the prayers of His people (1 Pet. 3:12). We know God cares. We trust Him to do what is right and to deliver us from the hands of our oppressors. So we keep on praying. Our confidence is that we will receive when we ask in accordance with His will (1 John 5:14). We trust that we will not receive what is not for our good nor what is wrong.

The “elect” are those who have chosen to be obedient to God; therefore, they are chosen by God (Heb. 5:8-9; 2 Thess. 1:7-9). They are God’s children by faith in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:26-27). Prayer is not a substitute for obedience, nor has God promised the disobedient He will hear and answer their prayers (Psm. 66:18; 1 Pet. 3:12). God does not delay unnecessarily the answer to our prayers, nor does He always answer in the way we have decided He should, but His answer will be that which is best for us.

Elijah prodded the prophets of Baal, in the famous contest upon Mt. Carmel, and mocked them because their “god” did not hear their cries and answer their prayers:

And they took the bullock which was given them, and they dressed it, and called on the name of Baal from morning even until noon, saying, O Baal, hear us. But there was no voice, nor any that answered. And they leaped upon the altar which was made. And it came to pass at noon, that Elijah mocked them, and said, Cry aloud: for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked. And they cried aloud, and cut themselves after their manner with knives and lancets, till the blood gushed out upon them. And it came to pass, when midday was past, and they prophesied until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that there was neither voice, nor any to answer, nor any that regarded (1 Kings 18:26-29).

We serve a God Whom we can trust to hear and to act: “God often seems to man to be acting as this unjust judge, to be turning a deaf ear to the prayer of his people.”¹⁸ He will act, not just because one continues to cry to Him (cf. 1 Thess. 5:17; Rom. 12:12; Eph. 6:18; Matt. 7:7, 11; 6:7; Luke 22:41-42).

If an unjust judge would hear the widow’s plea, surely the just God of the universe will hear ours. Note the contrasts between the judge and God:

God is just, and this man was unjust. This petitioner was a lonely widow and a stranger; God was dealing with His own elect. The woman came uninvited; Christians are pressed with invitations to ask, and knock, and seek. The unjust judge never agreed to listen to the widow; God has promised over and over again, that it shall be granted to those that ask. The judge may have had relations with this woman’s adversary which would complicate, and, in some way, commit him to an unnecessary quarrel in her behalf, if his office should be exercised in defence; God is in open and declared conflict, on His own account, with our adversary, and rejoices to defeat his machinations, and avenge His own chosen speedily.¹⁹

Conclusion

“Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?”:

We must not interpret one passage in such a way that it will contradict others. It is clearly taught in the New Testament that the church with its faithful members will be here when Jesus comes. (See Matthew 24:40, 41; 1 Corinthians 15:24, 51; 1 Thessalonians 4:15, 17.) Therefore the question of Jesus should be understood as a kind of warning, stirring up his hearers to beware lest their individual faith should fail them.²⁰

In the face of sin’s abounding, and the persecution, mockery, accusation, and assault which come upon Christians, shall we faint? Will our faith fail? Will the failure be because of “unanswered” prayers? Or, because prayers are not answered immediately? We must not become discouraged, but pray. We must not give up, but pray. Delay should only make our desire greater, our faith stronger, and our prayers more fervent (Jas. 5:16).

Christ is coming again (Heb. 9:24-28). When He comes, will He find faith?: “Beyond all doubt he will answer the prayer of faith—but will the faith exist then to make the prayer? The judge will be ready but will the widow be there?”²¹ Why continue to pray? Because we trust in the God of love, Who has promised to hear and to answer. We know God will be faithful. Will we?

Endnotes

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CHAPTER 8

The Parable Of The Two Sons

Danny Box

Commendation

BEFORE WE BEGIN OUR study, I would like to express my appreciation to the elders of this congregation and to brother Clarke for the invitation to be a part of the **POWER** lectureship. It is an honor for me to be counted worthy to be a part of this great lectureship and to be able to present a lesson from God's Holy Word.

Introduction

Our Lord was the Master Teacher. On numerous occasions He was referred to as "Rabbi," which is a designated term for one that is a teacher (John 1:38). The people recognized that He was a teacher sent from God (3:2), and, as such, they gathered in multitudes to hear Him and the things He taught. During His ministry, our Lord used several different methods to teach the multitudes. One method He used most often was teaching by parables. Approximately one-third of our Lord's teaching, as recorded in the Gospel accounts, was in the form of parables. A parable is defined as "a simple story illustrating a moral or religious lesson."¹ As used in the New Testament, it signifies a story designed for the

purpose of teaching a spiritual truth to individuals or great multitudes. Dudley Nichols made the following statement about Jesus and His use of parables:

Jesus of Nazareth could have chosen simply to express Himself in moral precepts; but like a great poet, He chose the form of the parable, wonderful short stories that entertained and clothed the moral precept in an eternal form. It is not sufficient to catch man's mind, you must also catch the imaginative faculties of his mind.²

With the parables that He used, our Lord did exactly that. He caught the imaginative faculties of the mind of His audience, and was able to teach eternal truth.

At one time Christ was asked why He used parables to teach (Matt. 13:10). Our Lord explained that He used parables to reveal the truth to some, while hiding the truth from others (13:11-14). He went on to say that He used parables on some occasions "because they seeing, see not; and hearing, they hear not, neither do they understand" (13:13).³ As Christ spoke parables designed to convey truth to the believers, He expected the believers to understand the parables, to make the necessary transference from the parable, and to perceive the truth that He was trying to deliver.

In order to interpret the parables of the Lord properly, J. Dwight Pentecost, in his book **The Parables of Jesus**, states that one must observe four certain principles in their study. The first principle, one that the Lord Himself stated, is that the parables all concerned the kingdom of heaven. Second, according to Mr. Pentecost, we need to remember that the parables were never spoken in a vacuum. Jesus was explaining or addressing some question or problem His hearers were facing. Third, the parable itself must be carefully studied to determine the true point at issue. It must not just be taken at face value. Then, fourth, the one

trying to interpret the parable must study the item or matter in the parable to which the allusion is made, and from which truth is to be transferred.⁴ Keeping these principles in mind, let us now discuss the parable that has been assigned to me.

The Parable Of The Two Sons

But what think ye? A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first and said, Son, go work today in my vineyard. He answered and said, I will not; but afterward he repented, and went. And he came to the second son, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go sir; and went not. Whether of them twain did the will of his father? They say unto Him, The first. Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, that the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not; but the publicans and harlots believed him; and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him (Matt. 21:28-32).

Background

As Matthew 21 opens, we see our Lord making His triumphant entry into Jerusalem. This occurred on the first day of the week, which was Sunday, just a mere five days before He would be put to death.⁵ As He enters Jerusalem, He has reached the last stage of a long and sorrowful journey. Our Lord rides into Jerusalem on the back of a colt in fulfillment of prophecy. In **The Exposition of the Bible**, John M. Gibson writes the following concerning His entry into Jerusalem:

This was the first occasion on which our Lord distinctly put forth His claim to royalty. From the beginning of His ministry He had shown Himself to be a “prophet, mighty in word and

deed” and to those who followed Him it became manifest that He was the Prophet foretold by Moses, for whose coming they had been taught to look for with eager eyes (Deut. 18:15-19). From the beginning of His ministry too, the Saviour had been proclaiming “the gospel of the kingdom,” but when we examine carefully all He says about it, we find that He never expressly asserts that he Himself is king. Not that He conceals this all important truth; He speaks of the kingdom in such a way that those who have ears to hear may learn that He is “King of Kings and Lord of Lords.”⁶

As He rode into Jerusalem, the crowd received Jesus like a king. They spread their garments out for Him to ride on. Others cut palm branches and spread them in the street. The multitude went ahead of Him and followed behind Him crying out, “Hosanna to the Son of David...Hosanna in the highest” (Matt. 21:9). William Barclay, in his commentary on the book of Matthew, writes:

They shouted “Hosanna!” We must be careful to see what this word means. Hosanna means “Save now!” and it was the cry for help which a people in distress addressed to their king or their god. The cry of the people is really a kind of quotation from Psalm 118:25, “Save now, I beseech thee, O Lord.” The phrase, “Hosanna in the highest!” must mean, “Let even the angels in the highest heights of Heaven cry unto God, Save now!” Essentially this cry is a people’s cry for deliverance and for help in the day of their trouble; it is an oppressed people’s cry to their Saviour and their King.⁷

After His entry into the city, Jesus went to the temple. There, seeing the tables of those who bought and sold and the money-changers, the Lord overturned the tables and drove out those who would make the temple a den of thieves. This was the second time that the Lord cleansed

the temple, the other time being recorded in John 2:15. Each time, Jesus accused the people of using the temple for something for which it was not intended.

When the temple was cleared out, Jesus began to heal those that were lame, sick, and diseased, and, as He did this, the people cried out even more, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" This upset the chief priests and scribes, and, as the Scriptures relate, "they were sore displeased" (Matt. 21:15).

The next day (Monday) Jesus returned to the city. It was while He was on His way that the barren fig tree was cursed and it withered away (21:18-22). Once in the city, Jesus went back to the temple and began to teach all those that came unto Him. It was at this point that the chief priests and the elders came and questioned His authority. Brother H. Leo Boles, in his commentary on Matthew, writes:

The chief priests were the heads of the twenty four courses or classes of priests....Elders were the rulers of the cities. Mark and Luke add "the scribes" who were the authorized teachers and helped to constitute the Sanhedrin. These chief priests, elders, and scribes may have represented the Sanhedrin; they asked for His authority for doing "these things." They wanted to know His authority for entering Jerusalem as He did, His expulsion of the traders and the brokers from the temple, and His teaching in the temple. They knew by what authority He did "these things," but they were unwilling to acknowledge that authority. To acknowledge God as His authority would have been to acknowledge Him as the Son of God and the Messiah; this they were determined not to do.⁸

Jesus countered the question of the Jewish authorities with a question of His own, a question which placed them in a dilemma. His question concerned the

baptism of John and where it came from, heaven or men. David Dickson, in **The Preachers Homiletic Commentary** on Matthew, states:

If they said in reply what was certainly true, that the mission of John was from above, they feared the Savior. If they said what was false and declared it to be only “of men,” they feared the people, who would listen to them no more. So all they could think of was—in a most clumsy manner—to try and leave the question alone and replied “We cannot tell.”⁹

Their answer then prompted our Lord to ask them a second question, “What think ye?” It is this question that led the Lord up to the point of relating **the parable of the two sons** to the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders.

The Meaning Of The Parable

In this parable we find a reasonable request made: “Son, go work today in my vineyard.” The father asked only what each son had the power to perform. His request involved no hardship on the part of either son, but was a rightful request for the father to make. The work needed to be done, and it needed to be done “today,” so the father made this request of his sons.

Also in this parable, we see two answers given. The first was “I will not!” This was a hasty, blunt answer given without enough thought or concern for the father or the work. This answer would grieve the father. The other answer, “I will go sir,” was given promptly, but it was not given with a grateful and ready mind. This answer was insincere, and, even though it was what the father wanted to hear, it eventually meant very little.

Contained also within this parable are two distinct responses to the father’s request. The first son, after he

had thought about the request and his response, “repented and went.” The other son, from all indication, even though he had assured the father that he would go and work, apparently forgot his promise and never obeyed the request of the father. In **An Exposition of the Bible**, Marcus Dods gives the following application of this parable:

The first son, the one who said he would not go, but afterwards repented and went, was the representative of the publicans and the harlots. They lived in open sin, and were not surprised that men should denounce them as hopelessly corrupt. But John’s preaching went to their hearts, because he assured them that even for them there was an open gate into the kingdom of God.

The priests and elders, the men who represented all that was respectable and religious in the country, were depicted in the second son who promptly said he would go for his father but did not do so. These priests and elders spent their time professing to be God’s people; their whole life was a proclamation that they were God’s servants, and a profession of their willingness to obey. And yet they failed to do the one thing they were there to do. They heard John’s teaching, they knew it was the voice of God, but they refused to prepare their hearts and understandings, as he taught them, that they might recognize Christ when He came.¹⁰

Jesus, with this parable, is teaching the religious leaders of that day about authority and obedience to that authority. The first son, when he had repented, went and worked in his father’s vineyard, submitting to his father’s rightful authority. The second son, by his words, recognized the father’s authority, but did not submit to that authority. Mr. Pentecost, in his book, puts it this way:

In this parable, Christ was showing that profession of obedience does not constitute sonship. Sonship is tested by obedience, not profession. Thus the Pharisees who claimed to be sons of God but did not obey the law and fulfill its righteousness could not be counted as sons. But one who submitted to the authority of the law and obeyed it was a son.¹¹

What a stinging rebuke it must have been to these chief priests, scribes and elders to have our Lord say to them “That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you.” They looked down on these people and considered them vile and unclean. They would do nothing to help them. All the publicans and harlots did differently was that they heard the words of God, delivered by John, and believed those things and were obedient to them. On another occasion our Lord delivered a stern rebuke against the scribes and the Pharisees. He accused them of saying, or professing to be religious, but not doing those things to prove they were religious. In fact, our Lord told them that all they did was to be seen of men and not to please God (Matt. 23:2-8). Then, some eight times in Matthew 23, our Lord called these religious leaders of that day hypocrites and fools. Our Lord told them that He had sent prophets, wise men, and scribes unto them, and they had persecuted and killed them (23:34). It was because of their attitude, as depicted by the second son, that the Lord made this pronouncement to them: “Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.”

John was sent for a specific purpose and with a specific message. His message, “Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 3:2), was for all the people of that day. He was preparing the way for the Lord (Mark 1:1-3) and was making it known to all that there was One coming that was mightier than he and that would bring a mightier message (1:7-8). It is by this parable that Christ

affirmed that all those who received John's message in faith were acceptable to God and were actually in the kingdom because of that faith. Our Lord made it quite clear that those who would listen to the Father, repent of their sins, and obey the will of the Lord would be rewarded.

This Parable Applied Today

The father in the parable is representative of God for us today. God speaks to all men today through His Word and says, "Son, go work!" It is God Who is ever seeking workers, and it is God Who draws men to the Savior. Jesus said, "No man can come unto me, except the Father, which hath sent me, draw him" (John 6:44). God does not do this through some miraculous means today. Our Lord explains how God accomplishes this: "It is written in the prophets, and they shall all be taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me" (6:45). The command from God to everyone is for us to work in His "vineyard."

The "vineyard" represents the church (1 Cor. 3:9). God does not want anyone to be lost, so He sent His only begotten Son to this earth so that all who believe and obey can be saved. While here as flesh, the Lord promised to build His church (Matt. 16:16-18), and we know that He did. After the Day of Pentecost, the Lord added to the church "daily such as should be saved" (Acts 2:47). Those in the church, or the body of Christ (Col. 1:18), and who faithfully endure to the end will be delivered up to the Father at judgment (1 Cor. 15:24). When we consider working in the "vineyard" of the Lord, we must keep these five things in mind: 1) How vast the sphere of duty! 2) How great the requirement of service! 3) How intense the responsibility! 4) How great the privilege! 5) How sure the reward!

The first son represents people who are lost in sin all across the world: those who have never heard the Gospel

message. This person then hears the Word, and that Word “pricks” their heart, they are convicted of their sins, and repent of those sins, and then obey the Gospel of our dear Lord. That is why it is imperative that we take the Gospel to the world, because there are many people in the world who would obey if given the opportunity. As Paul wrote in the long ago, “How shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?” (Rom. 10:14). We must do as instructed by the Lord and preach the Gospel to every person, in every nation all throughout the world, so that all men can have the opportunity to be saved (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Acts 8:4).

The second son is representative of those who are religious, and very sincere in that religion, but are within the realm of denominationalism. These people will hear the truth and, if it is not something they want to hear, they will turn a deaf ear to it or will change it in some shape or form. They profess to be “Christians,” but, all the while, they do anything except follow Christ. They do not wear His name but are known as Baptist, Methodist, Holiness, or numerous other names, and the name above their door does not reflect that it is the church of Christ. These people are not in the “vineyard” nor are they working in the “vineyard” of the Lord. Because of their efforts, the Lord’s church is damaged and oftentimes destroyed. There is only one **Lord**, one **faith**, one **body**, one **baptism**, one **hope**, one **Spirit**, and one **Father** (Eph. 4:4-5), and, unless we all understand this, and obey the commands issued by the Father, we are, like the second son, displeasing to the Father!

But also, the second son is representative of untold numbers in the Lord’s church today. These people have agreed to work in the Lord’s vineyard but are not working. When one obeys the Gospel, he makes a vow to God that

he will be a faithful worker (Matt. 20:1-16), and, at the end of his labor, he can expect just payment. But for various reasons, we see more and more who fail to understand that the Lord demands and expects a working faith. James says it best: “Even so faith, if it hath not works is dead, being alone” (Jas. 2:17). Jesus related to us that “Not every one that saith unto me Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he that **doeth** the will of the Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21, emp. mine, DB). Once we obey the Gospel of Christ and rise up out of the watery grave of baptism as new creatures (Rom. 6:3-4), we must then go forth as doers of the Word (Jas. 1:22). Our Lord has told us to “Look on the fields, for they are white already to harvest” (John 4:35), and, for us to accomplish the work of the church, we must be busy, active workers for Him. If we work for the Lord, the lost will be converted, the brethren built up, and those less fortunate helped.

As we close our study, let us make some comparisons between the **parable of the two sons** and the commands of the Lord.

1. The father addressed his sons individually. We are individually responsible for our own obedience. Paul affirms this fact by stating that we must all appear before the judgment seat of the Lord, so that we all may receive “the things done in his body, according to that he hath done” (2 Cor. 5:10).

2. The father did not force either of his sons to go to work. Man was made in the likeness and image of God (Gen. 1:26-27), and, as such, man is a “free moral agent.” This simply means that we have the ability to make choices. As people who can decide for ourselves, we are not forced to obey God’s commands. Each one of us must choose whom we will serve (Josh. 24:15), and our salvation or punishment will depend on that choice.

3. The father gave the same command to both sons. The terms of obedience today are the same as they have been ever since Christ died on the cross, and they apply to all men the same. Every person must **hear** the Word of God (Rom. 10:17); all must **believe** the Word once they have heard it (Heb. 11:6); then all men must **repent** of their sins (Luke 13:3); after repentance a person must **confess** their faith in the Lord before men (Matt. 10:32); and then **every** person must be **baptized** in the name of Christ for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38; Mark 16:16; 1 Pet. 3:21). Obedience to the plan of salvation puts one into the body of Christ (Gal. 3:26-27; Rom. 6:3-5), which is His church (Col. 1:18; Eph. 1:22-23), and it is within the confines of His body where there is found “all spiritual blessings” (1:3). That is why we must all be workers in His “vineyard” so we can hear Him say at judgment, “Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord” (Matt. 25:23).

The **parable of the two sons** is rich in content and suggests a number of practical lessons. The most important lesson, though, that we can glean from this parable is that the Father wants all men to be His sons and go work in His “vineyard” today! Brethren and friends, we must be like the first son, and repent before it is too late and get to work for “the night cometh, when no man can work!” No matter how good the intentions, no matter how sincere the promises, the simple fact is that words can never take the place of deeds. Listen to the Father, as He says to all of us, “Son, go work today in my vineyard.”

Endnotes

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5 H. Leo Boles, **A Commentary on The Gospel According to Matthew** (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1989), pp. 409-410.

6 "An Exposition of the Bible," **A Series of Expositions Covering All the Books of the Old and New Testament**, Volume 4 (Hartford: S.S. Scranton, 1910), p. 771.

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9 David Dickson, **The Preacher's Complete Homiletic Commentary on the New Testament**, Volume 1—**The Gospel of Matthew** (New York: Funk & Wagnalls), p. 496.

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11 Pentecost, p. 130.

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CHAPTER 9

The Parable Of The Growing Seed

David Brown

Introduction

ONLY IN MARK'S GOSPEL is this parable found. It does not stand alone, but is one of a series of parables pertaining to the kingdom of Christ. Matthew gives a more thorough report of this sequence of parables in chapter thirteen of his gospel. As do the other parables of the mustard seed and the leaven, Mark's parable speaks to the growth of our Lord's kingdom. Therefore, it should be studied with the parable of the sower in mind.

Jesus begins eleven of His parables regarding His kingdom with "the kingdom of heaven is like." Hence, we must have a basic understanding of God's kingdom to better grasp what Jesus taught about His kingdom.

A Study Of The Kingdom Concept

In the Old Testament we have God presented as the King of His people. Thus, there was in the mind of the Jews the fact that they were special to God and chosen of Him to accomplish certain things for Him and to His glory. Hence, in the days of the judges, Gideon declared, "the Lord will rule over you" (Judg. 8:23).

In Samuel's day, when the people desired a king to be as the nations around them, God informed Samuel that "they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them" (1 Sam. 8:7). God allowed them their king. However, the faithful Jews always understood that God was their only king. The psalmist expressed this sentiment when he wrote, "The Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all" (Psm. 103:19).

In the days of David and Solomon, the kingdom of Israel reached its zenith and glory. This prominence she enjoyed for only eighty years. After that brief time, the kingdom declined till, because of rampant sin, it ceased altogether. With fond memory, the Jews always longed for the lost glory that was David and Solomon's united kingdom. Thus, in the predictive element of the teaching of the prophets, they repeatedly declared that in time God would establish a kingdom that would never be destroyed (Dan. 2:44). Thereby God would once again honor His people who would wear His name. Jeremiah also prophesied that God would elevate David to be king. He would be the Messiah, and His throne would be permanent (Jer. 30:9; Isa. 9:6-7). Thus, the Jews longed for the time when God would intervene in the affairs of men to fulfill His promises. And, in the fullness of time, Jesus came—He came preaching the kingdom of heaven is at hand (John 1:14; Gal. 4:4; Mark 1:15).

In the four books of the one Gospel, different terms are used to picture our Lord's kingdom. The phrase "the kingdom of God" is used most often (Matt. 19:24; Mark 9:1; Luke 17:21; John 3:3), while at other times it is set out as "the kingdom of the Son of man" or the kingdom that belongs to Christ (Matt. 16:28; John 18:36). Furthermore, it is called the kingdom of the Father (Matt. 13:43). Often it is only identified with the word "kingdom" (4:23).

The only writer to use the phrase “the kingdom of heaven” is the apostle Matthew, and he uses it most often. By this descriptive term, Matthew is not referring to the kingdom of God **in** heaven. By this phrase Matthew is establishing that the kingdom is from heaven and thus from God. It is a heavenly kingdom governed by God’s Will. It, therefore, belongs to God. Since Matthew wrote for the Jews, and they would not say God’s name, it is quite possible that Matthew resorted to the typical way the Jews declared that something was from or having to do with God. Therefore, in the Jewish mind, “kingdom of heaven” would equate with and mean the “kingdom of God.”

The fundamental definition of “kingdom” is “reign” or “rule.” Therefore, to have a kingdom there must be a king, territory, law, and subjects. Hence, “kingdom” always retains that fundamental meaning and description in its various usage in the Scriptures.

Paul wrote of being translated out of darkness into the kingdom of the Son of God (Col. 1:13). The Hebrews writer spoke of “receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.” Thus, contrary to the future-kingdom theorist, the term “kingdom” is used as a **present reality**. And the terms “church,” “body,” and “family” reflect that present reality of the kingdom of Christ.

The term “kingdom” is also used to refer to its eternity. Peter spoke of “the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 1:11). This is not speaking of a different kingdom. It is the eternal, glorified kingdom of Christ in heaven. It references the kingdom’s **future state and place** of being.

God’s kingdom was purposed in His mind before the world was (Eph. 3:9-11). As studied, God’s King and kingdom were promised and prophesied (Gen. 22:17-18; Gal. 3:16-18; Dan. 2:44; Heb. 12:28; 13:20; Psm. 110:1-4; Acts 2:34-36; Heb. 8:1-4). Through types and shadows, God

spoke before time of His kingdom (Col. 2:16-17; Heb. 8:5; 9:7-9, 11-26; 10:1-4). The Law of Moses educated the Jews and pointed them to the King, Jesus Christ of Nazareth (Gal. 3:19, 23-24). When fully prepared and without haste, Christ came in the fullness of time (4:4). John the Immerser, and Christ, (Matt. 3:2; 4:17, 23; 9:35; 10:7; Mark 9:1) did intensive and crucial preparation for the kingdom. Until John, the law and the prophets prophesied (Matt. 11:13). This meant that something new was then added, for John preached that the kingdom was at hand, which no prophet preceding him had done (Luke 16:16; Matt. 3:2; 4:17, 23; 9:35; 10:7; Mark 1:14-15). The establishment of that kingdom was on the first Pentecost in Jerusalem following the resurrection and ascension of our Lord. On that day was Christ declared to be sitting, thus reigning, at the right hand of God (Psm. 110:1-4; Luke 24:25-26; 1:32-33; 12:32; Acts 2:34-35)

It must be understood that the existence of any kingdom implies a plan, preparation, and the actual building of it. Thus, Christ's kingdom did not happen by accident. Presently, His kingdom awaits its glorification in heaven in the very presence of God. With these introductory, basic principles concerning the kingdom of Christ in mind, let us delve into the study of the growth of the Lord's kingdom.

How The Kingdom Grows

There are certain spiritual laws regarding the growth of the kingdom. These laws may not be ignored, amended, or abrogated. The natural and acquired talents of the sower will not substitute for them. Moreover, the power is not in the sower, but in the living Word of God—the Seed of the kingdom (Luke 8:11; John 6:63). These spiritual laws are not the creation of man any more than the Seed of the kingdom originated with man (John 14:16, 26; 16:12-13;

17:8, 14, 17, 20-21; 20:30-31; Heb. 2:3-4; Jude 3). In examining this parable, we are studying the growth of the Seed.

God has placed life in the seed—the Word of God. It “germinates” when it is sown in the proper soil (Luke 8:15). Once sown, the seed works regardless of the awareness or lack of it on the part of the sower. Whether it is corn seed or the Seed of the kingdom, man does not understand how the power of life is in either one—but God has located it in each kind of seed. The following lists pertaining to the Seed of the kingdom further emphasize the relationship of the Seed (the Word) to Christ’s kingdom.

The Seed of the kingdom is:

1. The voice of God (Matt. 22:31).
2. The voice of the prophets (Acts 13:27; 15:15).
3. The witness and voice of the Holy Spirit (Heb. 10:15-16; Rev. 2:1, 11).
4. The commandment of God (1 Cor. 14:37).

Furthermore, the Seed is:

1. Divine in origin (1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Pet. 1:21).
2. Pure (Psm. 12:6; 119:140).
3. True (Psm. 119:160; John 17:17).
4. Powerful (Heb. 4:12).
5. Enduring (1 Pet. 1:23, 25).
6. Spirit and life (John 6:63; Heb. 4:12; 1 Pet. 1:23).
7. Steadfast (Heb. 2:1-4).

The words of the following song declare the sentiments of the faithful sower.

“Scattering Precious Seed”

Scattering precious seed by the wayside,
Scattering precious seed by the hillside;
Scattering precious seed o’er the field, wide,
Scattering precious seed by the way.

Scattering precious seed for the growing,
Scattering precious seed, freely sowing;

Scattering precious seed, trusting, knowing,
Surely the Lord will send it the rain.

Scattering precious seed, doubting never,
Scattering precious seed, trusting ever;
Sowing the word with prayer and endeavor,
Trusting the Lord for growth and for yield.

Chorus:
Sowing in the morning,
Sowing at the noontide;
Sowing in the morning,
Sowing the precious seed by the way.¹

There are many things that are the responsibility of the sower and necessary to getting the seed sown. However, the emphasis in this parable is on the growth of the seed—not on what man does, the state of the soil, or the cultivation of the soil. Thus, we need to understand that this parable does not teach all the truth involved in converting someone. We must not take part of the truth and assume that it is all of the truth. This approach will only lead to false positions.

Someone once declared that there is no end to the good we can accomplish if we do not care who gets the credit. In the salvation of our souls, ultimately God gets the credit. However, there are several factors involved in God getting us saved. Paul had this in mind when he wrote about one sowing, another watering, and God giving the increase (1 Cor. 3:6-7). No member of the church, no matter how naturally endowed by God to be a teacher, how learned in the Word, or how tireless a worker, has any room for boasting. We should be humble before and grateful to God as we all do our part in sowing the Seed of the kingdom. I do not know how the Seed grows once it is sown. I cannot perform the work of conversion. I cannot know the secrets of the human heart. I can only do my best to live as the Bible teaches and teach the whole counsel of God in every

wholesome way in every place conducive to proper Bible study. Where is there any room for a teacher to be puffed up in his work as a sower of the Seed of the kingdom?

The Time Factor

One cannot rush the growth of the Seed: “First the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear” (Mark 4:28). When one thinks of all the factors involved in the growth of a plant, it should help us to understand the development of the Seed of the kingdom from its germination to the plant full grown and producing. Remember, Paul instructed Timothy, and thereby every Gospel preacher, not only in the importance of sound doctrine, but also in longsuffering towards those who hear the sound doctrine (1 Tim. 4:2). This is the case because time is necessary for growth. Much that seems insignificant to man turns into a great work in the kingdom of God—if given enough time.

When the Seed is first sown, and for sometime thereafter, what transpires is invisible. However, we must not think that, during this period, proper and necessary things are not happening. In time it grows and in doing so becomes visible. The end result is a visible harvest. Of course, this does not mean that, with every sowing of the Seed, one will reap a bountiful harvest. Other factors may enter in to stop the Seed’s growth and development (Mark 4:15-19). The reaping may come from Seed sown many years before by someone else. Moreover, there is no certain time of the year that sowing and reaping cannot take place. Therefore, Christians must be continually sowing and reaping.

Have we ever made the mistake of expecting the product long before it has had time to develop? Should children be expected to be adults? Indeed, in like manner, new converts must have time (properly used) to grow to maturity (Heb. 5:12).

When I was a teenage preacher, and for some years thereafter, I longed for the day that I could know things and preach according to my ability like the faithful preachers who then were in their forties, fifties, or older. However, I knew that I had to give myself time, and such time had to be used properly by me in order for my goal to be reached. Hence, I had to be patient and longsuffering with myself (which sometimes was not easy) if I expected to get close to my goal. If I had to exercise such patience and longsuffering toward myself (and I certainly desired God, and still do, to be longsuffering toward me), how much do I need to be longsuffering toward others?

Young preachers, in particular, need to learn to preach the Truth boldly, with much zeal and without compromise, but not attempt to rush the Seed and what it alone can do in the soil (minds) in which it was sown. Live the Truth. Preach the Truth. Defend the Truth. And do all three with wisdom (Jas. 1:5). Then give the Truth the time it needs to do what no preacher can do. Believe it or not, God knows how to handle the unseen things—the germination and growth of the Seed before the first blade appears: “So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it” (Isa. 55:11). It is amazing to me at the number of preachers who have a hard time in understanding and applying the truth of this verse, yet they expect others to grasp other scriptural principles while they seemingly remain ignorant of this one. Ah, longsuffering, thou art a jewel for all to wear!

What Have We Learned?

Gradual, indeed, is the growth of God’s kingdom. Applied to the individual, the parable is a lesson on patience. Christian growth is gradual. In moral and spiritual development, we must not forget nature’s

lesson, the necessity of gradual growth. We all thrill to the artistry of a great musician in concert. As I write these words I am listening to the practiced, mature, and professional voice of the great operatic Italian tenor Pavorotti. However, very few know anything of the long road of struggle that has led such a musician to greatness. If this is true with such mundane things, what about things Divine? As teachers of the Gospel, we must remember that the human mind is so constituted that only by patient and persistent efforts can one's character be formed into the likeness of Christ by the Sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17).

Kingdom growth is orderly. The growth of the seed is marked by an orderly development. When corn seed is buried in the soil, the process begins. In time, small blades spring forth, then the full plant, then the bloom, and finally the full grain.

In the development of spiritual life, there are distinct stages of development. New converts are described as being newborn babes who should desire the spiritual milk of the Word for their growth (1 Pet. 2:1-3). Sadly, some never grow beyond the infant stage (1 Cor. 3:1-4). Others are spiritually mature (Phil. 3:15). Thus, we should not expect to gather grain from the freshly sprouted blade. Recognition of this will go far in helping to understand and work with fellow Christians.

God causes the growth of His kingdom. We do not understand how a seed germinates and grows. The farmer can prepare the ground. He can fertilize and cultivate it after the seed is sown. But he cannot make the seed grow. Only God does that.

The same is true in the spiritual kingdom. God must operate on the heart. This is done by the power of the Word—the Gospel (Rom. 1:16). The sower cannot make the Seed germinate in the human heart. The sower must

sow the Seed and wait patiently for God to do His part.
The Scripture reads:

Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receives the early and the latter rains. Be ye also patient; stablish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh (Jas. 5:7-8).

While Paul wrote the following words to Christians for their encouragement, the sentiment he expressed is applicable to our present study. This is the case because part of “well doing” is sowing the Seed of the kingdom. Paul stated, “And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not” (Gal. 6:9). With the inspired thoughts of James and Paul in mind, this is a good stopping place for this brief study. However, it is also a great beginning, as one contemplates one’s continual involvement in sowing the Seed of the kingdom and the power of God’s Word (Luke 8:11; Rom. 1:16; 2 Tim. 4:1-5; Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12; John 12:48).

CHAPTER 10

The Parable Of The Unprofitable Servant

Steven Yeatts

Introduction

IT IS INDEED A privilege to have the opportunity to be with the brethren here at the Southaven congregation to participate in this lectureship and to be edified by the study of God's Word. I have appreciated the efforts of past lectureships, as the material produced (both written and electronic) has been of great benefit to me in my personal study and growth in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. I also want to extend my appreciation for brother B. J. Clarke for the fine work that he is doing here and his many labors for the cause of Christ.

My assignment is to deal with the parable of the unprofitable servant spoken by our Saviour in Luke 17:7-10. It is written of this parable by Herbert Lockyer that several prominent volumes regarding the parables of Jesus do not include this particular one here from Luke 17. Lockyer penned:

Perhaps it is felt that, in comparison with many other parables, it cannot rank as one of the most important. But if the parable was meant to be a caution to the disciples, lest they should presume upon their possession of the power of faith (Luke 17:6), then surely it is an important parable to study.¹

The parable is as follows:

But which of you, having a servant plowing or feeding cattle, will say unto him by and by, when he is come from the field, Go and sit down to meat? And will not rather say unto him, Make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself, and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken; and afterward thou shalt eat and drink? Doth he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I trow not. So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do (17:7-10).

Prelude To The Parable

In order for us to appreciate the full scope of the meaning of the parable, we must consider the prelude to it contained in Luke 17:1-6:

Then said he unto the disciples, It is impossible but that offences will come: but woe unto him, through whom they come! It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones. Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him. And the apostles said unto the Lord, Increase our faith. And the Lord said, If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto this sycamine tree, Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you.

Perhaps we sometimes lose perspective on the disciples' relationship to Jesus Christ by applying an aura to it that is not fitting. Yes, the disciples were daily companions of Jesus for a three-year period, but their

humanity was never forfeited or circumvented during this time frame, and they often struggled with the same issues that face Christians today: pride, impatience, lack of faith, and disloyalty. The language from verses one and two of Luke 17 indicates that, at this particular time, at least some of the disciples were struggling with their example. Jesus had used similar language in Matthew 18:6-7, in regard to those who were guilty of leading astray little children, and He reiterated such to His disciples again here in Luke 17.

H. Leo Boles wrote of this parable:

“Millstone” here means a common hand stone, not a large millstone which was turned by an ass, as in Matthew 18:6. Meal was ground in ancient time by taking one stone in the hand and pounding grain on another stone which was firmly fixed on the ground of pavement; this was a hand mill. However, the stone was large enough to hold one down in the water. It was better then and is now that one suffer physical death rather than to cause any of God’s children to stumble, even the least one of them.²

The Power Of Forgiveness

Jesus exhorted and warned the disciples to have a continual spirit of forgiveness and to stay in tune with their own behavior: “Take heed unto yourselves” (Luke 17:3). All Christians would do well to heed this advice, when considering the power of influence His disciples are to have: **“Ye are the salt of the earth....Ye are the light of the world”** (Matt. 5:13-14, emp. mine throughout, SY). As we ponder the Judgment that is to come, where all must appear and each must give an account of the things done while here on earth, we need to “soften” our hearts towards those who will be most easily influenced by the life that we lead (Matt. 5:16; 2 Cor. 5:10; Eph. 5:1; Heb. 9:27). Since it is possible that followers of Christ may lead others astray

by misbehavior and misrepresentation of the Christian life, **taking heed unto ourselves** is that daily spiritual check-up that occurs through study of God's Word. Therefore, when we examine the standard, we realize our need to be transformed to be better imitators of Christ when it comes to forgiveness (Rom. 5:6-10; 12:1-2; 1 Thess. 5:21). In that regard, the disciples were no different than we, and it speaks to their humanity and struggles, with which we can commiserate, and from which we can learn perseverance.

Jesus informed the disciples in verse three that there would be times when they would even offend one another, and, if such occurred, they were to reprimand the perpetrator. This rebuke was not merely a spiritual slap on the wrist, nor was it intended to be unjustly punitive. The word "rebuke" meant to "tax upon" or censure by speaking out against the improper action. The intent of this kind of rebuke was to serve as the impetus for repentance. This brings to mind the instruction:

Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; Let him know that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way, shall save a soul from death and shall hide a multitude of sins (Jas. 5:19-20).

When the offender repented, the mandate was plain—"forgive him" (Luke 17:3). Many interpersonal problems can be avoided in the Lord's church if we have the courage to rebuke those who trespass against us, and, if we are the offender, have the grace and dignity to repent and make things right with our brethren and in the eyes of God.

In Matthew 18, Jesus dealt with the question raised by Peter in regard to the prescribed amount of times we are to forgive one who trespasses against us (18:21). Peter

seemed to think that seven times was charitable and longsuffering, perhaps using the symbolic number of seven to indicate completion of one's responsibility toward the erring. Jesus informed him that "seventy times seven" was the prescription for forgiveness (18:22). This continual mindset towards forgiveness helps one retain the compassionate heart indicative of a follower of Christ and actually shows a high degree of self-understanding in realizing that we all will make mistakes. Christians who are able to empathize with others when it comes to the imperfect people that we are will motivate those in need toward repentance much more effectively than a heavy-handed, holier-than-thou approach (1 Cor. 9:27; Gal. 6:1-2; Jas. 5:19-20).

In Luke 17:4, Jesus used the "seven times" terminology to emphasize that His followers should be in a continual mode of forgiveness. There may be some in the church who will exhibit hurtful and spiteful behavior towards us, but Christians are to be concerned about "forbearing one another, and forgiving one another" (Col. 3:13). The Apostle Paul exhorted, "And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Eph. 4:32). When the Lord's church, individually and collectively, radiates this kind of example, both internally and externally, there is no doubt that the saints will be edified and the borders of the kingdom will be expanded.

Earlier in Luke's account, brothers and fellow disciples, James and John, had become incensed at a certain village of the Samaritans refusing to show acceptance towards Jesus as He journeyed towards Jerusalem. The response of James and John was to request of the Lord that they be allowed to call down fire from heaven to consume the Samaritans (Luke 9:52-54). Jesus rebuked them for their reckless request. By doing such,

Jesus set the example and laid the groundwork that made His discourse in Luke 17 all the more powerful in regard to a forgiving attitude, the purpose of the mission of Jesus Christ (“to save”), and the proper usage of rebuke when necessary (9:55-56).

I have been asked at times whether a person should forgive one who has been rebuked, but who refuses to repent. The instruction given by Jesus from Luke 17:3-4 is clear: “if he repent, forgive him.” The condition that was to precede forgiveness was the repentance of the guilty party, brought on by words of rebuke (censure). If one who has been rebuked boldly refuses to repent, it is not our obligation to forgive in the sense that the issue has been resolved, but it will certainly not benefit the offended party to harbor bitterness and allow the insidious nature of such bitterness to tear him apart. A bitter follower of Christ will be ill-equipped to render forgiveness should such an opportunity present itself in the future by the perpetrator’s eventually recognizing the error of his way.

Since it is a compassionate heart from which a proper attitude flows towards our fellow man that makes forgiveness possible, we should strive to maintain such a mode, even if there are unresolved issues that linger due to one’s refusal to repent. It is not up to us to right all the wrongs that we will encounter in this life, but it is up to each saint to “Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamor, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice” (Eph. 4:31). The inspired Hebrews writer penned that the saved of God should be “**Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled**” (12:15). I believe that the defilement that bitterness causes is the very blemish that Christ encouraged His disciples to avoid by maintaining a

spirit of forgiveness towards the repentant and by displaying an attitude that was harmonious with His own will. Christ was admonishing His disciples to congratulate themselves less and commiserate with their fellow man more regarding the empathy necessary to forgive the repentant offender repeatedly and move on.

The Power And Disposition Of Faith

In verse five, we read that the apostles had requested of Jesus, “Increase our faith.” Obviously, upon listening to the admonition of Jesus, they realized that there were areas in which they were lacking the qualities that Jesus sought of them. For example, Peter, due to his impetuosity, had admonished Christ that **“this shall not be unto thee”** regarding the crucifixion (Matt. 16:22). Christ, in turn, addressed Peter for the stumblingblock he had become because of his lack of faith in God and his proclivity to think in earthly terms (16:23). James and John sought to have special consideration in the hereafter by desiring positions on each side of the throne of Christ (Mark 10:35, 37). All of the disciples had asked Jesus who amongst them was the greatest (Matt. 18:1). Of course, it was the disposition behind these incidents and debates that concerned Jesus and caused Him to address the apostles’ need for a faith that was deep and abiding.

In verse six, Jesus spoke to the issue that the size of faith was not measured by a human perception of its enormity but was instead measured by their persistency of belief that one’s needs would be granted. Faith is not bequeathed to anyone as a one-time, all-encompassing gift, but faith requires planting, nurturing, and the processes of time, so that true growth occurs and the fruit is lasting (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 5:22-23; 2 Pet. 1:5-10).

Christ acknowledged that the disciples did indeed have faith, but, **“if ye had faith as a grain of mustard**

seed,” they would be able to have a tree plucked up by the roots and cast into the sea (Luke 17:6). This is parallel to what Jesus had told His disciples following their inability to cast out a devil from a young child. Christ told them that it was due to their **“little faith”** that they had been unsuccessful in that which they attempted to do (Matt. 17:20). Christ spoke of the quality of faith that was necessary to accomplish that which one desired. Earlier, in the account of Matthew, Jesus likened the grain of mustard seed to the kingdom of heaven and, though He spoke of the mustard seed as the **“least of all seeds,”** nevertheless, the potential of such a seed was great and its results would yield recognizable fruit from which many could benefit (13:31-32).

I find it compelling that Jesus never referred to any of His disciples when He used phrases like **“great faith”** or **“great is thy faith.”** He spoke of **“great faith”** when referring to the centurion whose son He healed (Matt. 8:10; Luke 7:9). Christ said of the woman of Canaan, **“great is thy faith,”** as she persisted in pursuing healing for her demon-possessed daughter (Matt. 15:28). But He is never recorded as commending His disciples for having **“great faith.”** Those who journeyed with Him and saw the miracles that He rendered and knew that He was the Son of God were not complimented for their depth of faith, but were instead reprimanded for their lack of it (Matt. 14:31; 17:17, 20; Mark 4:40; John 20:27).

Again, I want to reiterate that the disciples, though daily companions of Christ during His earthly ministry, gave us many examples of their humanity, from which we can learn the necessary attitudes to defeat lack of faith, pride, and an unforgiving spirit. If we are objective about ourselves, we will find it hypocritical to be hypercritical of the disciples for the times that they fell short of the attitudes Christ wanted them to have.

Service To The Master

Beginning in verse seven, Christ spoke of the responsibility that was incumbent upon one who serves. There was no confusion of roles when it came to the relationship of master to servant and servant to master. The arrangement of service was not a temporary one that would allow the servant to seek redress even after he had put in long hours of labor in the fields (Luke 17:7). The rendering of duty by the servant was a perpetual one that was expected.

When Jesus spoke here to His disciples, He directed them to put themselves in the position of one that had a servant. The servant in this scenario had been laboring in the field, both plowing and feeding cattle. The servant came in from the field, and Jesus inquired as to whether the master would tell the servant, "Go and sit down to meat," or would the master instead say, "Make ready, wherewith I may sup" (17:7-8)?

A servant who in this case had served in the field saw no hiatus of servitude when he came into the house; the service was to continue when it came time for the meal. The master would feel no sympathy for the servant whose obligation it was to wait on him. The master expected service and demanded such simply by the nature of the relationship. Johnson, in his commentary, notes the following: "Our Master owes us no thanks when we serve him faithfully, for we have only done our duty."³

Since the duty of the servant was understood, how beautiful it is to remember the promise that Jesus made to His disciples in Luke 12:37! Christ said:

Blessed are those servants, whom the lord when he cometh shall find watching: verily I say unto you, that he shall gird himself, and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them.

In this scenario, the faithful servants to whom nothing is owed based upon their own merits will be shown favor by the Master if they are found watchful, prepared, and diligent. Then the roles of service will be reversed, as the loving Master will wait on the faithful servants and they will find comfort in His ministrations, not because of their unmatched profitableness, but because of the unmatched nature of the grace of God.

Luke 12:37 is in regard to the second coming of Christ, and that promise reveals for us the magnitude of the grace of God and the benefits of the Master Whom we serve, because one day we will be rewarded. The reward to the faithful servants will be granted not because of our profitableness, but despite our lack of profitability, and due to the grace and promises of the Master to those who follow Him. It is impossible to place God in a role of being accountable to us because clearly we are reliant upon Him, but the depth of the grace and mercy of God is what caused our Saviour to say, "Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28). It is truly overwhelming when we realize the "unspeakable gift" that our Master offers us by His grace (2 Cor. 9:15).

The master would spend no time in flattering his servant for that which was a matter of normal responsibility and function. The rhetorical question, "**Doth he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him?**" that the Lord asked in verse nine, He answers for the disciples: "I trow not" (Luke 17:9). "Trow" only appears this one time in the New Testament and it means "to think or suppose."⁴ The answer is one that we can certainly relate to when we think of times that someone has asked an obvious or rhetorical question, to which we respond, "**I think not!**"

Unprofitable Servants

The servant should not expect accolades for delivering that which was his assumed duty all the while. Faithful servants will obey the commands of the master even when the weariness of rendering such duties may push their dedication to the limit and test their mettle. For servants of Christ to accomplish all things that were commanded them would not change this fact: **“We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do”** (Luke 17:10).

Eliphaz, a friend of Job, in his third discourse to his troubled companion, said, “Can a man be profitable unto God, as he that is wise may be profitable unto himself?” (Job 22:2). Eliphaz seemed to make his point that even to suffer hardship as a servant of God does not add higher value or consideration of man in the eyes of the Ruler of all: “Certainly God does not depend on man for profit or advantage of any kind. Neither our wisdom nor our goodness extends to Him.”⁵

The lack of profitableness notwithstanding, a follower of Christ is not relieved of the duty to serve; rather, he is further obligated to **“keep his hand to the plow”** for the Master (Luke 9:62). God is not looking to us for assistance to complement His unequalled attributes. He is looking to us for persistence in doing that which we are bound to do because He is the Master and we are the bondmen.

The Apostle Paul encouraged, “And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not” (Gal. 6:9). The same encouragement was offered the church at Thessalonica (2 Thess. 3:13). There will be times when devoted servants of God may seek relief from their duties, perhaps feeling that they have gone above and beyond the call of Christian duty, but none can ever outgive the Giver of all good gifts (Jas. 1:17). Neither can we at any time rest on our laurels while still in this life

and say that we have arrived spiritually. When we arrive spiritually is when it can be said of the faithful, **“Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them”** (Rev. 14:13).

Coffman noted, “This parable is clearly a lesson designed to teach humility, obedience, and a sense of lacking any merit in the sight of God.”⁶ Coffman further noted that misuse of this parable has caused some to hypothesize that those who only keep the commandments of God have no reward: “There was never a servant on earth who did ‘all that was commanded’ as did this one; and therefore he should be called the ‘hypothetical servant.’”⁷

Coffman continues:

The message of this hypothetical servant is, therefore, that even if any person whosoever, Jew or Gentile, should actually do “all that is commanded” (repeated twice in the parable), he would not by such obedience place Almighty God in a position of being debtor to him.⁸

The Vastness Of God’s Grace

This parable is profound as it pertains to the subject of the grace of God. Grace, by definition being “unmerited favor,” proves our inability to render to God that which is greater than what He has rendered to us. To launch into a comprehensive study regarding the grace of God is not permissible due to time and space, but more than just a causal review is warranted here, due to the magnitude of the subject and its relevance to each of us.

God granted grace to Noah. I believe that there is significance in the fact that, after the wickedness of man was noted, God was grieved, and God made His decision to destroy man from the face of the earth: **“But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord”** (Gen. 6:8). The

world was wicked, and men had forsaken God, and they pursued only evil, **but** there was grace. The Lord was remorseful that He had made man, “**but** Noah found grace.” In our day and time, we may wonder how the longsuffering nature of God is able to endure in light of prevailing godlessness, greed, degenerate political leadership, rejection of basic morals, and desire for that which is false religiously, **but** there is grace! Praise be to God for His grace that has spanned through the ages and offers salvation through His Son for all who will obey (Heb. 5:8-9).

False Ideas About Grace

It is a tragedy that so many “religious” people in the world misunderstand the matchless grace of God today. The false concept that God’s grace has done it all and that there is no responsibility of obedience for one outside of Christ, is both disturbing and damning. Grace has delivered the terms of salvation to an unworthy population, but its deliverance does not dictate our response to it. Of course it is true, as we have reviewed in this study, that one cannot put himself in a position of causing God to be indebted to us by our accomplishments. That is not the subject matter under consideration when discussing grace. Paul told the Romans that justification occurs by faith and that faith is the access to the grace of God that has been given to us, though we stand undeserving of its measure (Rom. 5:1-2). Faith (mankind’s part) is the key that opens the door to grace (God’s part). When the disciples requested an increase of their faith, as was noted earlier, it was not so they could gloat as they had in times past, but was instead a request that stemmed from their inability to be as benevolent as God and from their desire to do better.

When we start comparing our flaws to the purity of the grace of God, we will not only be humbled by it, but we will be obliged to recognize that by no means can we be

considered to be “**profitable**” to Him. God, to Whom is due all of our effort and then some, outweighs any work of merit we can accomplish by the essence of His grace. This is clearly not to the exclusion of our faith, but is contingent upon it, because, as Paul penned, “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9).

God’s Grace Requires Man’s Faith

Grace does not exclude faith that demands obedience to God. Remember, “But Noah found grace,” and then review what the Hebrews writer said of Noah:

By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith (Heb. 11:7).

The grace of God delivered the blueprints to Noah, and Noah’s faith caused him to act upon that grace by obeying the terms.

The succinctness of the exhortation written by Paul to Titus shows the completion of Christ’s work towards our salvation and the necessity of obedience: “For **the grace of God that bringeth salvation** hath appeared unto all men” (Tit. 2:11). What else may man require of God? He sent His Son, Who died for the sins of the world and shed His precious blood for the purchase of His church and the redemption of our souls (Acts 20:28; Eph. 1:7; 5:23-25). To require Christ to accept us by simply acknowledging His existence and sacrifice (via “the sinner’s prayer” or any other unscriptural mode) to the exclusion of obedience (hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, and being immersed) is a willful refusal to take the key of faith and open the door that is the grace of God (Rom. 4:2; 6:3-4, 17; 10:10, 17). The imploring of Jesus comes to mind here as

He uttered, “**Why call ye me, Lord, Lord and do not the things which I say?**” (Luke 6:46).

Increased faith as it applied to the apostles (and certainly to us) was to acknowledge that faith enough to get the job done began with “mustard seed sized” faith. Over time this seed, which was lodged deep in their hearts, with proper attention and nourishment, would accomplish that which was necessary, because the source of their trust was God, and not their own merit.

The perspective of the Apostle Paul when it came to duty was, “For though I preach the gospel, **I have nothing to glory of:** for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!” (1 Cor. 9:16). The servant ought to take no glory in the performance of that which is expected and required of him. The attributes of God are diverse, and profound, and defy our ability to truly grasp them with our finite mind. God is “ready to pardon, **gracious and merciful**, slow to anger, and of great kindness” (Neh. 9:17). The psalmist echoed that description by saying, “But thou, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abundant in lovingkindness and truth” (Psm. 86:15). Truly God’s grace projects onto us all a measure of being “unprofitable” that cannot be bridged even by the fulfillment of that which the Master expects of us. Nor can the gap be shortened by our “**going above and beyond**” the call of duty, when it is inherent within our duty to continually serve Him Who gave Himself for us.

All Christians (“**unprofitable servants**”) who have a sense of duty will faint not at the work that lies before us (John 4:35-38; Gal. 6:9; Heb. 12:1-2). We will glory not at our successes because we will find that, in the end, “we have done that which was our duty to do” (Luke 17:10; 1 Cor. 3:6; 2 Cor. 4:7). We need to humble ourselves to the hands of the Potter, of Whom Isaiah

wrote, “But now, O Lord, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand” (Isa. 64:8).

Conclusions—Lessons On Life

What the disciples learned that day from this parable was penetrating to the very essence of their faith. They learned that they had need to have their faith increased not by quantity, but by quality, and that they needed their sense of humility heightened. They learned that the inherent relationship of a servant to a master was one of a sense of duty and a constant mode of servitude. They learned that the servant could never justifiably place himself in a role of causing the master to feel indebted to him. They learned that they were not to think that they had exceeded that which was their duty even by going what seemed to be the “extra mile” in their mind. They also learned a valuable lesson on the grace of God—that He expects to be mirrored by followers of His Son and manifested by our humble, forgiving spirit towards one another. May God grant us the wisdom through His Word to pursue these attributes and also learn that which is necessary for the expansion of the kingdom of His dear Son (Col. 1:13).

Endnotes

1 Herbert Lockyer, **All the Parables of the Bible** (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1963), p. 295.

2 H. Leo Boles, **A Commentary on The Gospel According to Luke** (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1969), p. 326.

3 B. W. Johnson, **Johnson’s Notes on the New Testament** (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1992), p. 291.

4 James L. Strong, **The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible** (McClean, VA: McDonald Publishing), p. 24.

5 H. D. M. Spence & Joseph S. Exell, **The Pulpit Commentary** (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans), p. 369.

6 James Burton Coffman, **James Burton Coffman Bible Study Library CD-ROM** (Abilene, TX: ACUPress, 1999).

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

CHAPTER 11

The Parable Of The Unforgiving Servant

Glenn Colley

The Unmerciful Servant

WHAT A PLEASURE IT is to be associated again with the good people of the Southaven church and with brother Clarke in particular. I am honored to have this manuscript included in this excellent book, and it is my prayer that it will do good and no harm.

In Matthew 18:21-33, our Lord taught this remarkable parable:

Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.

Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants. And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents. But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. The servant therefore fell down, and worshiped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt. But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellowservants, which owed him

an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest. And his fellowservant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt. So when his fellowservants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done. Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee?

There are some parables which would specifically appeal to a particular class of people; the parable of the sower would appeal to the farmer, the parable of the pearl of great price would appeal to a merchant. And yet parables such as this one are quite universal in interest.

Becoming a Christian and having your sins forgiven make one a new creature (2 Cor. 5:17). Being saved will make you a changed man/woman. A saved man is changed in his view of sin, for he has repented, and repentance means “to change one’s mind.” Being baptized changes a man’s relationship to Almighty God (Acts 2:38). Furthermore, being **completely** forgiven of sins will change one’s entire outlook on life. We are so grateful to our merciful God.

There are four major scenes in this parable. For ease of memory we will call them The Facts, The Fortune, The Forgiveness, and The Failure.

Facts—The Day Of Reckoning

First, we should consider the historical background of the parable’s essential elements. Let’s put this in its first-century setting.

Roman law in the first century had some legal restrictions to prevent people from abusing debtors, but it did not effectively stop the cruelty. In the ancient world, debtors were cruelly treated, often without regard to their ability or intention to pay. Furthermore, unlike today's American treatment of those who default on a loan, Roman law exacted imprisonment as penalty to debtors who got behind on payment.

The logic behind such a threat was not totally without validity. Such a perilous possibility would force a man to seriously examine and exhaust every possible source he had to find the necessary money to pay the debt. Did he have some secret cache of money hidden in the basement? Did he have a rich cousin who could give him the money?

In spite of the legal restrictions, the entire system of debts and cruelties was recklessly abused in the ancient world.

Even God's people had to be cautioned about how they acted when someone could not pay what was owed them. Mistreatment of debtors was frequently condemned by the prophets. Ezekiel and Nehemiah called God's people back to a strict observance of law where mercy and justice were intended to prevail:

He that hath not given forth upon usury, neither hath taken any increase, that hath withdrawn his hand from iniquity, hath executed true judgment between man and man (Ezek. 18:8).

If he beget a son that...Hath given forth upon usury, and hath taken increase: shall he then live? he shall not live: he hath done all these abominations; he shall surely die; his blood shall be upon him (18:10, 13).

Now, lo, if he beget a son...that hath taken off his hand from the poor, that hath not received usury nor increase, hath executed my

judgments, hath walked in my statutes; he shall not die for the iniquity of his father, he shall surely live (18:14, 17).

And I was very angry when I heard their cry and these words. Then I consulted with myself, and I rebuked the nobles, and the rulers, and said unto them, Ye exact usury, every one of his brother. And I set a great assembly against them. And I said unto them, We after our ability have redeemed our brethren the Jews, which were sold unto the heathen; and will ye even sell your brethren? or shall they be sold unto us? Then held they their peace, and found nothing to answer. Also I said, It is not good that ye do: ought ye not to walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the heathen our enemies? I likewise, and my brethren, and my servants, might exact of them money and corn: I pray you, let us leave off this usury. Restore, I pray you, to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their olive yards, and their houses, also the hundredth part of the money, and of the corn, the wine, and the oil, that ye exact of them. Then said they, We will restore them, and will require nothing of them; so will we do as thou sayest. Then I called the priests, and took an oath of them, that they should do according to this promise. Also I shook my lap, and said, So God shake out every man from his house, and from his labor, that performeth not this promise, even thus be he shaken out, and emptied. And all the congregation said, Amen, and praised the Lord. And the people did according to this promise (Neh. 5:6-13).

Remember that the Jewish teachers indirectly encouraged personal vendettas by a faulty application of an “eye for an eye.” It was originally intended for the courts to insure that the punishment for a crime would be commensurate with the crime committed, and no more. Such a concept would prevent excessive punishment or vengeance. Yet, in practice, it was eventually stretched to

teach that a man could avenge his injuries and seek “justice” apart from due process of the law. A vigilante attitude prevailed among many. They would simply take the law into their own hands.

The Rabbis taught that a man was to be forgiven three times, but no more. Thus the context and Peter’s question: “how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?” In view of the fact that Jesus was teaching in Matthew 18 how to be reconciled to one’s brother, this is a natural question for Peter to ask. How far would Jesus take this?

Payment was demanded. The fellow could not pay. Natural course was rather routinely stated. He and all his were to be sold so that some payment could be made. To do otherwise was not the king’s natural course, and the listeners to the Lord’s parable would expect the natural course of things. Understand that the proceeds of the sale of the servant and his family and his possessions would not come close to paying the total debt. It was simply all a creditor could do before absorbing the loss.

Now, the big promise: “I will repay!” This demonstrates that he did not have any idea how much ten thousand talents was. If he lived ten lifetimes, he could not repay it. Yet he is frightened and desperate. He could not expect mercy, and he apparently had no money at all—otherwise he would have offered it in hopes that partial payment would buy him some time.

What Is The Application?

The parable compares God to a “certain king.” God is the One to Whom we must give account. He must be reckoned with:

And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell (Matt. 10:28).

So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God (Rom. 14:12).

Who shall give account to him that is ready to judge the quick and the dead (1 Pet. 4:5).

Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord (Rom. 12:19).

For we know him that hath said, Vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense, saith the Lord. And again, The Lord shall judge his people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb. 10:30-31).

The Gospel of Jesus Christ and His cross is not a compromise with the world—it is an ultimatum! Our sins are like debts:

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors (Matt. 6:12).

And forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil (Luke 11:4).

Brethren used to speak often of “sins of omission and commission.” Omission meant that an individual had failed to do what God commanded him to do, and commission meant that he did that which God forbade. Either of these places us in debt to the Almighty. Obedience to God’s commands is **due** to God, and by failing in our duty we become indebted to His justice, which demands the execution of the penalty of the law. On the other hand, when we decide to sin, we misappropriate God’s blessings. We are using what is not ours without paying for it: “God made the world and all things...for in him we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:24, 28).

Fortune—Ten Thousand Talents

It is hard to ascertain exactly the amount of money described. The value of money constantly fluctuates, but let us see if we can get a general idea. If “talent” is silver, the Roman standard would make it about three million dollars. If it is silver and the Jewish standard, about ten million dollars. If it is gold, over 150 million dollars.

Perhaps looking at the value of other familiar things will be beneficial.

To construct the tabernacle cost twenty-nine talents:

All the gold that was occupied for the work in all the work of the holy place, even the gold of the offering, was twenty and nine talents, and seven hundred and thirty shekels, after the shekel of the sanctuary (Exod. 38:24).

A solid-gold crown placed on king David’s head weighed one talent:

And David gathered all the people together, and went to Rabbah, and fought against it, and took it. And he took their king’s crown from off his head, the weight whereof was a talent of gold with the precious stones: and it was set on David’s head. And he brought forth the spoil of the city in great abundance (2 Sam. 12:29-30).

Elisha’s servant Gehazi, in his lie to get something out of Naaman, came and asked for one talent of silver (2 Kings 5:22).

Solomon, in the height of his wealth and power, made only 666 talents of gold in a year’s time: “Now the weight of gold that came to Solomon in one year was six hundred and threescore and six talents of gold” (2 Chron. 9:13).

Now, consider the application. This is the only parable which seeks to describe the enormity of God’s mercy and forgiveness. Observe that, in the parable of the talents,

the most any man had was five. The amount considered here is two thousand times that much.

This is the picture of our debt and helplessness before God. We have sin. The debt was made by us. One day you will be called for reckoning, and you know right now you can never make ten thousand talents. You owe too much.

What was this debtor's life before reckoning? What a miserable wretch he must have been! How unhappy he must have made his family! Did he suffer with stress-induced ulcers? Did he move from place to place? Did he steal? Was he always looking over his shoulder? Remember that he was **brought** to the king, not that he came to speak to the king. Yet there is no indication that the king's servants had any trouble at all finding him. They knew how to find him.

Some hide in darkness, in hopes of not being noticed by God: "For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved" (John 3:20).

Some procrastinate—They say, "We'll just worry about that later" (Acts 24:25). Yet, in God's reckoning, there will be no escape (Heb. 2:3).

This is a picture of many sinners. If God will "just give them enough time," they will make amends for their wrongs. Many folks believe that future obedience can make up for past disobediences: "I've made some mistakes, but from now on I'm going to do better. I'll quit drinking. I am going to quit committing adultery. I'll quit lying. Surely, if I do right for a long time it will make up for what I have done in the past." Or, "I haven't done that stuff in twenty years. That's got to account for something." In simple terms, this is a sinner going about to establish his own righteousness (Rom. 10:3). We can start today and never commit another sin until the day we die, but that alone will not erase one-half of one sin we have committed.

Suppose you buy a new car, and the payments are \$400 each month. You miss three payments at the beginning, but then you start paying faithfully. One day the bank calls and says, “we need to speak to you about those missed payments.” You respond, “Hey now—I’ve been doing good for two years now—I haven’t missed a payment. That must count for something. Surely, that makes up for the others!” What do you suppose the man would say?

Forgiveness

There were various possibilities for the king to show mercy. He could have shown mercy and just sold the servant without selling his family. He could have offered to garnish 65% of all the man made for the rest of his life, yet let him keep the remaining 35% and live a free man. Such would not have paid the debt, but would have shown great mercy. He could have turned the man’s life into a nightmare by offering six months extension, after which the loan would be paid in full or the man would be sold with his family and possessions.

He forgave the debt. The man owed nothing. It is as if the debt never occurred. Whatever he made he could keep. The fresh air of freedom is so sweet.

Consider the application: remember Peter’s question about the frequency of forgiveness in one day? Jesus taught seventy times seven. Just to see the magnitude of God’s forgiveness, look at the numbers. Seventy times seven each day: 490 times each day. There are 1440 minutes in a day. Rounded off that suggests that He would forgive us every three minutes around the clock from now until we leave for the other side of eternity! No one who will repent is beyond God’s forgiveness. And, when God forgives a debt, He does not rub it in. He rubs it out:

I am the Lord thy God...showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments (Exod. 20:2, 6).

Know therefore that the Lord thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations (Deut. 7:9).

And he said, Lord God of Israel, there is no God like thee, in heaven above, or on earth beneath, who keepest covenant and mercy with thy servants that walk before thee with all their heart (1 Kings 8:23).

O give thanks unto the Lord; for he is good; for his mercy endureth for ever (1 Chron. 16:34).

If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land (2 Chron. 7:14).

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise (Psm. 51:17).

He promises unlimited forgiveness to those who repent!

A Failure—To Improve One's Character

But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellowservants, which owed him an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest. And his fellowservant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt (Matt. 18:28-30).

Apparently, little time has passed. The reading makes it seem to be moments. Those who serve Christ cannot really understand how a man could have so little redeeming quality in his character. Considering what had just happened, how could he have anything on his mind besides celebrating his forgiveness of ten thousand talents?

Friends, God expects His goodness to have a strong effect on our character.

Where do we, as Christians, learn to forgive? We learn it from God Who forgave us. Quit dividing the church over matters of trivia. Quit church-hopping because you have a falling out with your brother. Every Christian should repeat these words over and over again: "When I think of the amount for which the Lord God has forgiven me, it is a mighty simple matter to forgive the people around me for the relatively small things they have done against me."

Listen to the apostle Paul say it: "And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Eph. 4:32).

It would have been so easy for the servant to forgive that one hundred pence. In fact, the blessing of the king to him would have given him all the more joy if he had forgiven the pence. Every person reading this chapter thinks forgiveness and mercy are good things if he is the recipient of them. But what if we are called upon to give that mercy? How hard it is for us to deal with others as God deals with us! It is pathetic to consider how we are sometimes so unlike our heavenly Father when it comes to forgiveness.

The one hundred pence would perhaps amount to fifteen or twenty-five dollars. If you say, "Well, a debt is a debt, and twenty-five dollars is twenty-five dollars, and he was within his rights..." you missed the point. Sometimes a man must give up his rights in order to do the right thing. Perhaps Joseph was within his legal rights

to destroy his hateful brothers when they came asking for grain. But he did not exercise those rights. Look for times in your life when you are handed an opportunity to show compassion when you **could** flex your muscle, times which for one reason or another give you the upper hand. You could crush them. But you remember the ten thousand talents of which you have been forgiven, and the joy and desire to offer mercy envelop your heart. Golden opportunities! With such forgiveness people will know we have been with Jesus.

There is something else. For the merciless there will be no mercy. God's forgiveness is abundant but not unconditional. Our Lord said, "But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt. 6:15).

James echoed that truth when he wrote in James 2:13, "For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy."

Before we leave the subject of forgiveness, let us remember some important facts. First, forgiveness must never be refused when sought with repentance. As long as a man will repent, you must forgive him. If he refuses to repent, keep the door of forgiveness wide open. To do otherwise is to commit spiritual suicide.

Second, forgiveness without repentance is not godly. God will not forgive where there is no repentance. He never has. 1 John 5:16 says:

If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it.

In context this passage can point to but one thing: impenitence about sin.

Third, to forgive one who does not repent is to encourage continuation of sin.

Fourth, our forgiveness of those who repent must be free from lingering ill will and hostilities. We are pretty good actors and actresses in this thing. We smile and speak hollow words of forgiveness but often we do not mean it. We cannot wait to get on the phone to some busybody we think is our friend and tell all. As a popular song says, "That's not Christian."

Martin Lloyd-Jones wrote:

Whenever I see myself before God and realize something of what my blessed Lord has done for me at Calvary, I am ready to forgive anybody anything. I cannot withhold it. I do not even want to withhold it.

An unforgiving spirit will result in an emotional prison here, and an eternal prison hereafter. The ill will I feel toward another has a boomerang effect and comes back to hurt me.

The king's words must have poured from his mouth with righteous wrath: "Till all should be paid." The phrase is strictly a proverbial statement. He will never pay it. He cannot. This is much like our saying, "It will be a frosty day in July before that will happen!"

It is interesting that this parable, which is about the abundant forgiveness of our God, ends with total emphasis on man's decision to do right. Please read it carefully and behold the severity of God.

Conclusion

James Davis wrote:

The limitless character of forgiveness springs from its Divine origin. Forgiveness belongs to the ethics of heaven. According to the laws of

justice, forgiveness is above the law of justice,
as the Sovereign who pardons in clemency is
above the judge who is compelled to condemn
injustice.

How thankful we must be that God does not treat us
and our debts as we oft treat our fellow man!

CHAPTER 12

The Parable Of The Good Samaritan

Paul Sain

Introduction

HOW MANY TIMES HAVE we been driving down the highway and come upon someone standing by a stranded vehicle, needing help, and we made an impulsive decision to drive on by without helping? For fear of personal harm we refused to “**get involved.**” Because of the extensive media hype of every robbery, murder, or attack on “**good Samaritan**” types who tried to help, we often decline to aid a distressed traveler.

How many times has someone walked into a church office and we stood face to face with a scrubby-looking person with foul body odor, unshaven, strong cigarette smoke smell filling the air, etc., and we are asked to help them with troubles of this life, whether food, gas money, travel expense, etc.?

If you search the Internet for a mere few seconds you find that the phrase “**Good Samaritan**” has been attached to many organizations, such as a boys’ ranch, battered and homeless children, hospital, village, Methodist church, and a beach resort.

The parable of the “**Good Samaritan**” is likely one of the most familiar parables spoken by our Saviour. As was true with the grand illustrations of the Son of God,

this one especially was an earthly story with a heavenly application. Truly, it is one of the most typical and practical parables we find in Holy Writ.

In this parable we see the three basic philosophies of life:

- (1) What is thine is mine—robbers.
- (2) What is thine is thine, and what is mine is mine—priest and Levite.
- (3) What is mine is thine—good Samaritan.

And, behold, **a certain lawyer** stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? He said unto him, What is written in the law? how readest thou? And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself. And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live. But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbour? And Jesus answering said, **A certain man** went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among **thieves**, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. And by chance there came down **a certain priest** that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise **a Levite**, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side. But **a certain Samaritan**, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had **compassion on him**, And went to him, and **bound up his wounds**, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and **brought him to an inn**, and **took care of him**. And on the morrow when he departed, he **took out two pence**, and **gave them to the host**, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee. Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves? And he said, He that shewed mercy on

him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise (Luke 10:25-37, emp. mine throughout, PS).

Do we dare place ourselves in the “shoes” of one of the three? Would we be like the priest and refuse to go out of our way? Would we be guilty of curiosity like the Levite and go over and investigate, but then coldheartedly refuse to help? Or would we lovingly, sacrificially, help, even at the expense of time and money? Is it possible that we have both feet in the shoes of the priest and Levite?

In our study, we will first itemize the **Individuals Involved**, then we will examine their **Actions and Attitudes**, and finally, we will emphasize the **Lessons Learned** from this great story.

Individuals Involved

The Lord taught so effectively by illustrations, real-life examples, and events of which His audience was so familiar. At times it was parents and children He would emphasize. At other times it might be seed and soil, planting and harvest. Let us briefly examine the individuals of which our Lord spoke at this time.

The lawyer. He was one who had devoted most of his time to the study of the ancient manuscripts. He was considered an expert in the legal affairs of the nation. It is not sure if he had ulterior motives in asking this question, seeking to trap and ensnare the Master, or if he asked from a sincere heart. There are reasons to think that he was serious.

The one who was robbed. We do not know who he was, nor if he was a Jew or Gentile. His rank, descent, or religion is likewise unknown. He is generally thought to have been a Jewish merchant, as they frequently traveled this road, but this is not certain.

The thieves. They were brutal, selfish men who were devoid of all pity as long as their greed was served. They knew no god but their own desire. Their actions were motivated by the satanic principle that “might makes right.”

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was a dangerous, robber-infested, treacherous journey which ran through wild and desolate country. This road was known as “the bloody way” since so much blood had been shed there. It was steep and rugged in places. The way was also rocky and narrow with deep ravines and limestone caves, which were perfect hiding places for robbers.

It was natural to refer to going down to Jericho. There was/is a descent of about 3,000-3,500 feet from Jerusalem to Jericho in the 18-20 mile distance.

The road connected the city of privilege, the seat of history and religion (Jerusalem), with the city of commerce (Jericho).

Priests were likely to be on this road often, as Jericho was a priestly city. They would travel this road as they in turn would go to Jerusalem to perform their monthly courses. A Samaritan would often be there as he traveled to conduct his business.

The ones listening to the Lord at this time were, no doubt, able to “see” the events occurring, having traveled this road themselves.

A certain priest. The priest was known as a religious man but did not pass the Saviour’s test. He chose not to help the man in distress. He was one of the twelve thousand priests living in Jericho at this time.

The priests were descendants of Gershon, Kohath, and Merari (sons of Levi). The priest was a servant in the temple. His life was supposed to be one dedicated to the service of God. He was expected even to show mercy to a beast (Exod. 23:4-5). He certainly was expected (under obligation) to help such a man.

A Levite. Here was another religious person, a minister of religious worship, an interpreter of the law, who failed to help one in need. The Levite was from the priestly tribe of Levi. All priest were Levites, but not all Levites were priests. He was surely acquainted with the Law of God, so it was known that he should have taken care of the needs of the man in desperate need.

The Levite was more calloused than the priest. He went and looked at the man. He examined him and then left him half-dead, bleeding, broken, bruised, robbed, and helpless! How cold and uncaring!

Both the priest and the Levite had adequate instructions concerning what their actions should have been. Note these Old Testament passages:

Thou shalt not see thy brother's ox or his sheep go astray, and hide thyself from them: thou shalt in any case bring them again unto thy brother. And if thy brother be not nigh unto thee, or if thou know him not, then thou shalt bring it unto thine own house, and it shall be with thee until thy brother seek after it, and thou shalt restore it to him again. In like manner shalt thou do with his ass; and so shalt thou do with his raiment; and with all lost thing of thy brother's, which he hath lost, and thou hast found, shalt thou do likewise: thou mayest not hide thyself. Thou shalt not see thy brother's ass or his ox fall down by the way, and hide thyself from them: thou shalt surely help him to lift them up again (Deut. 22:1-4).

If thou meet thine enemy's ox or his ass going astray, thou shalt surely bring it back to him again. If thou see the ass of him that hateth thee lying under his burden, and wouldest forbear to help him, thou shalt surely help with him (Exod. 23:4-5).

And if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not vex him. But the stranger that

dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God (Lev. 19:33-34).

He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God? (Mic. 6:8).

Both the priest and the Levite might have taken action if they had found in the law, **“If thou shalt see a man lying half-dead upon the highwyside, thou shalt not pass by without helping.”** But in light of the fact that they were told to love thy neighbor, they washed their hands of this desperate need and went on their way.

A certain Samaritan. It is interesting to note the Holy Spirit did not call this man “good.” Man has called him by that term, yet with good reason. The Samaritans were a mixture of Jew and Gentile and were hated by the full-blooded Jew. If citizens, they were second or third-class citizens. The Jews would have no dealing with the Samaritans at all, but rather treated them as outcasts. We remember the woman at the well and what she said to our Saviour (John 4:9).

But the Samaritan proved he was a man of kindness, compassion, and neighborly love. He stopped to help the man in dire need.

Actions And Attitudes

Attitudes will determine actions. A Christ-like attitude will produce Christ-like actions. A selfish attitude will produce similar sinful actions. In this parable, we note three contrasting attitudes toward those in need. There is an attitude of (1) indifference, (2) curiosity, and (3) sympathy (empathy) reflected in the three men.

The lawyer. As usual during His earthly ministry, the Son of God was teaching. A crowd was gathered, desiring to hear His every word. The fact that the lawyer “stood up” suggests this was some formal meeting or gathering. A lawyer asked Him a question (whether it was intended to trap Him, or if it was a serious inquiry, is insignificant). He was a student of and knew the Law, but Jesus was a new teacher. So he was putting the Lord to the test. He asked, **“Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”** This is an excellent question. How wonderful it would be if the world would sincerely seek the answer to this eternity-determining question!

Jesus responded by wisely turning the question back to the lawyer, saying, “What is written in the law? how readest thou?” The Lord knew that the man of the Law knew the answer. The phrase “How readest thou?” was a technical term, used often by scribes, teachers and lawyers as they consulted one another. In their discussion, they would say, “How do you read it? How do you see it?” Jesus was telling him that the question he asked was already answered. The Lord knew that strict orthodox Jews wore round their wrists little leather boxes called “phylacteries” which contained certain passages of Scripture: Exodus 13:1-10; 11-16; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-20. So the Lord was telling him to look at the phylactery on his own wrist and it would answer his question.

The lawyer answered by saying, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.”

The lawyer gave the correct summary of the ten commands according to Moses, as recorded in Deuteronomy and Leviticus. He quoted from Deuteronomy 6:5; 11:13; and Leviticus 19:18.

The lawyer probably felt good at this time. He knew he had faithfully paid his tithes. The laws had been observed with strict adherence. The feasts had been carefully kept. His prayers had not been neglected.

Christ said, "Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live." "This do" translates **touto poiei**, which is present active and means "continue doing."

The lawyer was not anticipating this answer. Suddenly he no longer felt comfortable and secure and thus sought to justify his own actions. He was seeking a "loophole" and asked, "Who is my neighbor?"

Before leaving this thought, let us remember the incident with the rich young ruler, who asked a similar question of the Master: "What good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?" (Matt. 19:16-22). When many of the "commands" of the Law were given, he said he had kept them from his youth. When he asked what else he lacked, he was told to sell all he had and give to the poor. He went away sorrowful because he was wealthy and he refused to part with his possessions.

The one who was robbed. As noted earlier, we do not know who he was nor what he did, nor why he was along the road. We know only that robbers set upon him. They ganged up on him, stripped him of his money and clothing, beat him up badly and left him half-dead. He was in a helpless condition. He was dying along the roadside. Unless someone came to his rescue, he would no doubt perish.

The thieves. These brutal wicked men were more violent than mere common thieves who would steal from another. While stealing is evil, the inhuman action of these evil ones is hard to imagine. The road was treacherous because of the evil men who sought to harm or kill for personal gain.

Often the thieves of this day would use a “decoy”—one of their number would act the part of a wounded man, and, when some unsuspecting traveler stopped to give assistance, the others would rush and overpower their victim. This would often cause some to be hesitant to offer help for fear of their own lives.

A certain priest was the first to come along, as the Lord continued His story. The priest reflected an attitude of “**every man must look after himself**” or “**It’s a dog-eat-dog world.**” He was interested in “number one”—himself. His action of not even going over to the injured and dying man demonstrated cold, heartless, selfish indifference. The priest was a horrible representation of how humanity should care for one another.

A Levite demonstrated even more heartless, cold, and calculating selfishness. He went over, looked, realized the desperate condition of the man, and possibly feared for himself to the point that he left immediately, regardless of the consequences to the man. Possibly the Levite thought, “this is not my problem,” “the man should not have been walking along this way anyway,” or “he may have provoked the fight and thus he deserves to die.” The Levite’s action proved he was pitifully unworthy of his sacred profession and office.

A certain Samaritan is the next one to come along. He was on horseback. We see immediately his benevolent spirit. This “good” spirit was not hindered by (1) **Prejudices of nationality or religion.** He did not exclaim, “Let him die, for all I care,” since he is a Jew. He did not react by saying, “He is not one of my race; thus I should have nothing to do with him.” (2) **Consideration of inconvenience** did not hinder him from offering the life-or-death assistance desperately needed. He may have been traveling toward important and urgent business, and thus to stop would cause him personal loss. He did not

fear being found near this man, and maybe others would accuse him of actually robbing and beating the man. He did not fear the robbers still being close by and coming upon him also.

The Samaritan had “compassion” upon the injured man. “Compassion” means “to feel sympathy, to pity.” Of all the men in the world to express neighborly love, the Jew would **not** have expected this of a Samaritan.

The Samaritan went to the poor man even at his own personal inconvenience and risk. If he paused to think, he knew the potential peril he was placing himself in physically and/or reputation wise. This did not deter him from binding up the wounds of the one near death. He likely used his own linen. He poured in wine (to likely wash out the wounds). He poured on oil to mollify and close up the wounds. Though this was costly, these were highly esteemed remedies throughout the East at this time. These ingredients were commonly carried by travelers (Gen. 28:18; Josh. 9:13).

The treatment of the injured man took a little time. But this too did not cause the Samaritan to cease aiding the beaten, helpless victim.

The injured man was then set on the beast of the Samaritan. He was ready for travel. The Samaritan walked. We are not told how far it was from the inn, but the benevolent man brought him to an inn.

The story might have ended at this point. Truly he had already gone beyond the call of duty. He had gone far out of his way to help and lend assistance. But that is not all that the kind “neighbor” did to help the beaten man. The Samaritan stayed with him and took care of him during the night, attending to his wants, denying himself rest and sleep. He provided lodging for him for a day or so, or whatever was needed.

When he left the next day, he took out two pence and gave it to the innkeeper and then said, if it cost more, he would pay him later. It is worthy of note that the Samaritan's credit was good. The innkeeper trusted him. He basically left the innkeeper a "blank check" for the man he found alongside the treacherous road. Remember, one penny was considered fair wages for a whole day's work (Matt. 20:2).

The kind-hearted man did all this without hope of recompense or reward. He did this when no one was looking. He was not seeking praise or glory. He did not seek a pat on the back or a chief seat in the synagogue as a result of his many acts of benevolence.

The "good Samaritan" bears the qualities of the despised Nazarene, the "good Samaritan" to the human race. We see the kind, loving, compassionate heart of Christ Himself in the actions of this despised half-breed.

Lessons Learned

The Son of God was the Master Teacher. His recorded parables serve to give us valuable lessons for our lives today. Of the many lessons, we especially note the following:

1. If we are to enjoy eternal life, Jesus taught that we absolutely must keep the entire law in its completeness. It has never been possible to be acceptable to our Heavenly Father and obtain salvation without doing God's will—all of it (Matt. 7:21; Heb. 5:8-9). Jesus Christ kept **all** of the Father's will. He is our example (1 Pet. 2:21).

2. Christianity involves action, not mere words. It is easy to "say" and then "do nothing." We must be willing to render personal and thorough service/sacrifice. We must possess the ability to demonstrate sympathy. Of the three who came along and saw the one who had fallen prey to robbers, the Samaritan was the only one who saw a "victim."

3. God's people must do good to all men, especially of the household of faith (Gal. 6:10), which includes our enemies (Matt. 5:43ff).

4. Heartless, compassionless, formal, organized, ritualistic religion is not true religion. It is **vain** (1 Cor. 13).

5. Be careful not to condemn others too quickly. It is easy to condemn the priest and Levite in this parable, while at the same time we may be guilty of the same thing toward ones in our world (cf. color of one's skin, social upbringing, language, etc.). We must not pay attention to social, racial, or religious barriers.

6. The priest and the Levite were near both by race and by office. The Samaritan by race and office was remote.

7. The parable of the good Samaritan was given to demonstrate to an inquirer that he did not have a clear conscience. It was not in direct response to the question the lawyer asked in Luke 15. (Cf. the prodigal son is often the point of greatest emphasis, when the primary emphasis was actually the actions of the elder brother.)

8. A term can be slanderous or a blessing (the term Samaritan was used in a slanderous manner in John 8:48 when the Pharisees referred to Jesus as such).

9. Coffman offers the following analogies in this parable:

a. The wounded man stands for Adam and all his posterity.

b. The descent from Jerusalem to Jericho is the fall.

c. The thieves are the devil and his servants who strip men of their garments of purity and the fear of God.

d. The man left half dead shows the result of the fall, in that man was left dead in his body but immortal in his soul.

e. The priest is the Law given through Moses.

f. The Levite is the teaching of the prophets.

g. The Good Samaritan is Jesus Christ Himself.

h. The inn is the church which receives every kind of men.

i. The failure of the priest and the Levite to aid the stricken man shows the inability of the Law and the Prophets to save the souls of men.

j. The compassion of the Samaritan shows the loving compassion of Christ Himself.

k. The Samaritan's paying all of the charges for the care of the wounded man stands for the fact that Christ paid the total cost of human redemption.

10. There is no substitute for kindness.

11. The Samaritan's credit was good. The innkeeper trusted him. He was not only a compassionate person, but he was likewise honest.

12. A man of any nation who is in need is our "neighbor." The early church had all things common and gave to others as each had need.

13. Our help to our fellow man must be as wide as the love of God.

14. Help must be practical, not just "feeling sorry" for someone.

15. There are many ways in which we can be a "good Samaritan" today:

a. Stop and help ones.

b. Attend to sick/bind up their wounds.

c. Take to motel/pay for expenses.

Conclusion

Let us note and remember the words of Henry Drummon (spoken approximately one hundred years ago). He said, "The greatest thing a man can do for his Heavenly Father is to be kind to some of his other children."

CHAPTER 13

The Parable Of The Unjust Steward

Don Walker

Introduction

TO UNDERTAKE AN ENDEAVOR such as this Lectureship and the preservation of the presented material in book form is an enormous one indeed. Our gratitude goes out to the Southaven church for providing such a bounty of material.

We commend the elders, deacons, and all saints of this fine congregation for the willingness to sacrifice so much to provide such a service for God's people and a lost world. We also extend a special "Thank you" to our brother B. J. Clarke. Who can know the hours he has spent from the beginning to the end on this effort? We are truly impressed with the high standard that is maintained through the whole process, which results in such a quality work. "Thank you" just does not seem to be enough. We are certainly indebted.

We are also thrilled with such a marvelous theme—**"The Parables Of Jesus."** An opportunity such as this to delve deep into the mind of our Lord is a rich opportunity indeed. We are impressed with the simplicity the parables contain, which expresses such profound truths. We truly have been blessed in our study and preparation.

"Never man spake like this man" (John 7:46)¹ are the words of the officers who had returned empty handed.

The chief priests and Pharisees had sent the officers to retrieve Jesus. Truly Jesus' teaching was profound and impressive. When Jesus completed the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7, the response is significant. Matthew 7:28-29 reads: "And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine: For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." Jesus was and is the Master Teacher.

Our Lord, while on earth, employed various methods of teaching. One of His favorite was the use of parables. One brother defined a parable as "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning." The Greek word that is translated "parable" is **parabole**. It is taken from two words—**para**, which means "beside," and **ballo**, which means "to throw." Thus, we see that "parable" literally means to "to throw beside." It is an everyday story, which has truth cast down beside it. J. Robertson McQuilkin writes this concerning parables: "The parable is part of a distinct form of literature called 'figures of comparison.' It is kin to the metaphor, because usually the comparison is implied rather than stated."²

Before we direct our attention to the specific parable at hand, please allow us to briefly present some material which may assist our study of the parables in general. Wayne Jackson mentions four specific ways in which parables are used in the Bible. He writes:

1. They were employed to make spiritual truth clear to those who were sincerely seeking the will of God.
2. Parables sometimes purposely concealed truth from the dishonest, who were eager to abuse it whenever they had access to it.
3. Parabolic narratives were used occasionally as a technique to cause men to assent to the truth before they realized its applicability to them personally.

4. Parables were especially helpful in enabling men to remember great truths easily.³

While we consider the purpose of Christ speaking in parables, we are reminded of the question the disciples asked concerning this matter: “And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables?” (Matt. 13:10). Jesus responded:

Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given. For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath. Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive: For this people’s heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear. For verily I say unto you, That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them (13:11-17).

When we undertake the study of a parable, there are some guidelines that must be followed. We will simply list some of these guidelines without elaboration, since we are confident these will be dealt with in greater detail elsewhere.

McQuilkin gives “six basic guidelines for understanding parables”:

1. Begin with the Immediate Context;
2. Identify the Central Point of Emphasis;
3. Identify Irrelevant Details;
4. Identify the Relevant Details;
5. Compare Parallel and Contrasting Passages;
6. Base Doctrine on Clear Literal Passages.⁴

Roy B. Zuck gives these five guidelines:

1. Note the Story's Natural Meaning;
2. Determine the Problem, Question, or Situation That Prompted the Parable;
3. Ascertain the Main Truth Being Illustrated by the Parable;
4. Validate the Main Truth of the Parable with Direct Teaching of Scripture;
5. Note the Actual or Intended Response of the Hearers.⁵

In considering these guidelines, we realize the two lists overlap, and hopefully we can see the sensibility of the points that are given. As we turn our attention to our specific assignment, let us keep these matters in our mind.

The Parable Of The Unjust Steward

And he said also unto his disciples, There was a certain rich man, which had a steward; and the same was accused unto him that he had wasted his goods. And he called him, and said unto him, How is it that I hear this of thee? give an account of thy stewardship; for thou mayest be no longer steward. Then the steward said within himself, What shall I do? for my lord taketh away from me the stewardship: I cannot dig; to beg I am ashamed. I am resolved what to do, that, when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses. So he called every one of his lord's debtors unto him, and said unto the first, How much owest thou unto my lord? And he said, An hundred measures of oil. And he said unto him, Take thy bill, and sit down quickly, and write fifty. Then said he to another, And how

much owest thou? And he said, An hundred measures of wheat. And he said unto him, Take thy bill, and write fourscore. And the lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely: for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light. And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations. He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much. If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? And if ye have not been faithful in that which is another man's, who shall give you that which is your own?

No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon (Luke 16:1-13).

The parable we are taking into consideration has widely been viewed as one of the more difficult to understand. William Barclay says, "In many ways this is the most puzzling parable Jesus ever spoke."⁶ We will address some of the difficulties further along. However, with its difficulties, if we will apply the guidelines mentioned earlier, not only will we be equipped to better understand the teaching, we will also supply for ourselves, a great spiritual feast.

Background

There are some who see this section, which begins with our assigned parable, as out of place or, at the least, disconnected and piecemeal. Michael Wilcox, on the other hand, references Luke's claim to be writing "an orderly account" (Luke 1:3). He proceeds to set forth a progression of themes. He sees in 13:22-14:35 the penitence with which a sinner must come to God. In

15:1-32 he beholds the “joy in heaven” with which God welcomes the penitent sinner. He continues to write:

What will emerge from the passage, thus considered, is the challenge which Jesus puts to his hearers. They have heard the message of 13:22-15:32, in which he has told them how men may come to God, and how God will welcome them. Now what will they do about it?...Here, in the same way, Jesus is confronting his hearers with the challenge to act on what they have been hearing.⁷

The parable does follow the context of the parables dealing with the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son, and “appears to be associated with it. Note the connective ‘and.’”⁸ Also in this context, Jesus will deal with the dangers presented by the great monster, mammon. Viewing this parable in its setting will most definitely help us to understand the teaching.

The parable, as is stated in Luke 16:1, was addressed to the disciples of Jesus. However, “the Pharisees also, who were covetous, heard all these things: and they derided him” (16:14). We need to keep this point in mind, as it will assist us in our understanding.

The Difficulties

That there are difficulties on the surface in this study is almost universally admitted. Yet what it may appear to say on the surface is not always what is said or meant. Charles Erdman makes these observations:

The parable of the Unrighteous Steward is often regarded as the most perplexing of all the parables of our Lord. It seems to picture a man who robbed his master and received his master’s praise and was pointed to by Jesus as an example for his followers; further, it seems to indicate that a place in heaven can be purchased with money.⁹

The first difficulty we will address is the commendation the unjust steward receives from his master, and Jesus' use of this as an example for His disciples. Was Jesus teaching that it is more acceptable to God to be prudent than it is to be honest? Far too often, we fail to take care in our reading. In our context, for what exactly is the unjust steward commended? He is not commended in his wastefulness. Nor is he commended for his fraudulent actions which follow. No! It says, "And the lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely" (Luke 16:8). The fact that he acted, when he considered what the end result was going to be, shows some wisdom and initiative. He made provisions for himself and his future. Now, Jesus can use that as an example. If this man responded wisely to provide for himself in these physical matters, how much more so should be the attitude of Christ's disciples concerning spiritual matters and the end of our trek here in this world. Considering the "big picture" and making provisions accordingly are admirable traits which are worthy of commendation.

Some seem to have a problem focusing on this one point, and they fail to realize that it is **not all** of the conduct of the steward that the master commends. Yet, this practice is not foreign to Scripture. Notice Jesus' teaching in Luke 18:

And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint; Saying, There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, neither regarded man: And there was a widow in that city; and she came unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversary. And he would not for a while: but afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man; Yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me. And the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge saith. And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night

unto him, though he bear long with them? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth? (18:1-8).

Notice how the **one** action of the unjust judge is viewed and used to underscore a truth concerning our Father in heaven. In Matthew 24:43-44 Jesus compares His return to the coming of a thief. Dare we take this analogy any further than to recognize the surprising nature of the time of Christ's return? I should say not. Nor should we overlook the fact that Jesus said, "Behold, I come as a thief" (Rev. 16:15). So it is with our context. We can admire the prudence of this unjust steward if nothing else!

Second, let us address the statement of Jesus found in verse 9: "And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness." What exactly does Jesus mean here? Does the end justify the means? Is the "hook-and-crook" attitude of the steward being condoned? Could Jesus be telling His disciples to buy friends with their money? Let us look at this statement a little closer, allowing the Bible to be its own best commentary.

Jesus warned of allegiance to "mammon" in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:24). The Bible continually warns of the dangers that pursue the rich. Jesus taught:

How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God! And the disciples were astonished at his words. But Jesus answereth again, and saith unto them, Children, how hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God (Mark 10:23-25).

No man can tell how many have had their souls pierced through with sorrow because of the fleeting riches of this world. Paul would provide a lengthy discourse on these matters:

But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith content. But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows....Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy; That they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate; Laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life (1 Tim. 6:6-10, 17-19).

The warning is clear. The dangers are obvious to the astute mind. Thus, money and riches are often addressed in a negative light and even as an enemy to the soul. Elders are not to be “greedy of filthy lucre” (1 Tim. 3:3). But as dangerous as the riches of this world are, we must also note 6:10. It is “the love of money (that) is the root of all evil.” He does not say “money is the root of all evil.” Our finances can certainly be used for God’s cause and to His glory.

There is another interesting observation. In both the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6) and Paul’s teaching (1 Tim. 6), that which is stored in heaven is referred to using language of this world. For example, Jesus said, “Lay not up for yourselves **treasures** upon earth...but lay up for yourselves **treasures** in heaven” (Matt. 6:19-20, emp. mine throughout, DW). Paul wrote, “Charge them that are **rich** in this world...that they be **rich** in good works...Laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come” (1 Tim. 6:17-19). Jesus would also use this same language while speaking to the rich young ruler:

Then Jesus beholding him loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and **thou shalt have treasure in heaven**: and come, take up the cross, and follow me (Mark 10:21).

Of course we realize that we cannot send silver and gold to heaven. While referencing this parable, Paul Butler makes this observation: “The first story (the parable of the unjust steward, DW) shows ‘how to’ use your money to get to heaven or send it on ahead in a different form.”¹⁰

Our third difficulty is, “Can a place in heaven be purchased with money?” Certainly there is a price for our redemption. Paul taught, “For the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). But do not be mistaken. Money cannot deliver us in the last day. The principle is seen in the words of Zephaniah:

And I will bring distress upon men, that they shall walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the Lord: and their blood shall be poured out as dust, and their flesh as the dung. Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them in the day of the Lord’s wrath; but the whole land shall be devoured by the fire of his jealousy: for he shall make even a speedy riddance of all them that dwell in the land (Zeph. 1:17-18).

Peter said:

Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot (1 Pet. 1:18-19).

No, Jesus is not teaching that we can buy our way into heaven.

However, just because a gracious and merciful Saviour has paid our debt does not mean there is nothing

for us to do here on earth. We have been saved by grace and “created in Christ Jesus unto good works” (Eph. 2:10). These “good works” will include, though not exclusively, a proper use of our financial funds. Helping those who are genuinely needy and funding evangelistic works would be just two examples of how we could use “the mammon of unrighteousness.” In this we lay up treasures in heaven or, as Jesus said, “make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness.”

The Design Of The Parable

Having dealt with some of the difficulties of this parable, we are now ready to address what Jesus was teaching. Concerning the purpose of this parable, Wayne Jackson writes: “The basic design of the narrative is to warn against the love of money, with special emphasis on using one’s material things in preparation for eternity.”¹¹

When we study the contrasts that are made in this parable, I am convinced we will see the main theme or design.

First, we see a contrast between “the children of this world,” and “the children of light.” Jesus said, “for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light” (Luke 16:8). Virgil Hale writes:

How true this is! We who are children of God (children of light) do not use as much wisdom in obtaining what we desire (a home in heaven) as children of this world use in getting what they want (the things of this life). They use far more wisdom in the physical realm than we do in the spiritual.¹²

As uncomfortable as this may sound, it is a valid statement. Just take a moment to consider how Satan and his children propagate evil. There is no realm of media that is not exploited with the deceiver’s goals in mind.

Radio, television, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet, are all used extensively for physical gains, if not for evil per se. As the children of God, we have not even scratched the surface of these various formats for the cause of Christ.

Let us also consider the fervor men use, not necessarily for evil, but rather in the pursuit of the things of this world. A house, a car, and financial freedom are all goals of men of the world. Much time and energy are spent in obtaining these goals. Can Christians truthfully claim that they seek heaven with the same fervency? It is this wisdom and fervency that Jesus has in mind when He speaks of the “children of this world” being wiser than the “children of light.”

The next contrast that is seen is the contrast between he that is faithful in his stewardship and he that is unjust. We can use the matters of this world to the glory of God and in preparation for heaven, or we can ignore the spiritual realm, thus proving to be unjust stewards, and be unprepared for heaven. When this unjust steward saw the inevitable end, he responded wisely (by making preparation) and rapidly. One day, we will stand before our God in judgment, and we must approach this day with fervency, wisdom, and faithfulness.

In these contrasts, we can see the design of the parable. We need to be fervent in our striving for heaven. In this fervency, we must present ourselves as faithful stewards.

Practical Lessons From The Parable

The first lesson that stands evident is that which is expressed in 1 Corinthians 4:2: “Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful.” As impressed as the master was with the steward’s ingenuity, the steward was still removed.

Our God has blessed us in this world. James wrote, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning” (Jas. 1:17). Yet, with these blessings come responsibilities. In fact, with stewardship comes an inevitable accounting. One day we will stand before the judge. He that has buried his talent most assuredly will not be prepared to give an answer.

Second, we have learned that there is wisdom in preparing for the future. Oh, how easy it is for us to become bogged down in the affairs of this world! Work, school, and recreation can very easily drain our time. As good, and even important at times, as these areas may be, we dare not allow them to blind our eyes to that which is so plain and clear and inevitable in the spiritual realm: “Every one of us shall give account of himself to God” (Rom. 14:12). We stand as fools if we are doing nothing to prepare for the inevitable, coming of our Lord.

Finally, we learn that our allegiance cannot be divided. Our money will either be our master, or we will master our money. It is as simple as that. Jesus said: “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Matt. 6:24). We will do well to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven.

Conclusion

The unjust steward was evil in many ways. There are certainly more actions that he displayed which would not be fit for Christians. However, his preparation for that which was certainly coming is commendable. Yet, simply because he receives this commendation does not imply our endorsement of all the evil he had done.

May we ever be “just” and “wise” as we labor here, and strive for a mansion there, as we all study our Bibles more and more.

Endnotes

1 All Scripture references are taken from the KJV unless otherwise noted.

2 J. Robertson McQuilkin, **Understanding And Applying The Bible** (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), p. 153.

3 Wayne Jackson, **The Parables In Profile** (Stockton, CA: Courier Publications, 1978, 1999) pp. 2-3.

4 McQuilkin, pp. 154-161.

5 Roy B. Zuck, **Basic Bible Interpretation** (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1991), pp. 211-218.

6 William Barclay, **And Jesus Said** (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), p. 146.

7 Michael. Wilcox, **The Message of Luke** (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), p. 159.

8 Jackson, p. 102.

9 Charles R. Erdman, **The Gospel Of Luke** (Philadelphia: Westminster Press), p. 147.

10 Paul T. Butler, **The Gospel Of Luke** (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1981), p. 348.

11 Jackson, p. 102

12 Virgil Hale, “The Unrighteous Steward,” **The Parables Of Our Saviour**, ed. Fred Davis, Garfield Heights Lectureship (Lebanon, TN: Sain Publications, 1983), p. 113.

CHAPTER 14

The Parable Of The Tares

Michael McDaniel

Introduction

IT IS MY *DISTINCT* honor and pleasure to be a participant on the eighth annual **POWER** lectureship. I appreciate the **POWER** periodical very much and enjoy writing for its pages on occasion. The **POWER** lectureship is always a delight to attend. Brother B. J. Clarke and the elders of the Southaven congregation are to be commended for the great work which they continue to do for the church of our Lord.

Our English word **parable** is a Greek word written with English letters or transliterated. It simply means “to place beside.” A parable is a story that places one thing beside another for the purpose of teaching. It puts the known next to the unknown so that we may learn. When Jesus said, “the kingdom of heaven is like...,” He was using a comparison or contrast to teach a spiritual lesson.

Our Lord employed various techniques in teaching the truth. Certainly, one of His favorite methods was the parabolic method of teaching. Parables were used by Him to conceal the truth from dishonest hearers and to reveal the truth to honest hearers (Matt. 13:11-13). Warren W. Wiersbe wrote that “at least one-third of Christ’s recorded teaching is found in parables. To ignore these stories is to rob ourselves of much that He wants us to learn.”¹

The parable of the tares is one of two parables that Jesus explained Himself. The other parable interpreted by Jesus is the parable of the sower. The parable of the tares is one of the kingdom parables. It reveals the work of the Son of God through the saints of God in the sowing of the seed of the kingdom. Those who have received that seed are called the sons of the kingdom. Also presented is the active work of the devil in sowing his seed, and the children of the wicked one which are thereby produced. The kingdom of heaven would be exposed to trials and would face obstacles in the world. Yet, God would ultimately right all wrongs in the eventual separation of the servants of the Savior and the servants of Satan to face their eternal reward or punishment.

As we explore the parable of the tares let us observe: (1) The Speaking of the Parable (Matt. 13:24-30), (2) The Sowers of the Seed (13:37, 39), (3) The Seed that was Sown (13:38), (4) The Setting for the Sowing (13:38), (5) The Separation of the Saints and the Sinners (13:39-41), (6) The Suffering of the Sinners (13:42), and (7) The Shining of the Saints (13:43).

The Speaking Of The Parable (Matt. 13:24-30)

Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. So the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? from whence then hath it tares? He said unto them, An enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them.

Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn (13:24-30).

The parables of Jesus are of events which either did happen or could have happened. In this parable, the owner of the field had an enemy who, under the cover of darkness, sowed tares in the field in which the wheat had been sown. **Smith's Bible Dictionary** says this concerning tares:

A noxious plant, of the grass family, supposed to mean the darnel. It grows among the wheat everywhere in Palestine, and bears a great resemblance to it while growing—so closely that, before they head out, the two plants can hardly be distinguished. The grains are found, 2 or 3 together, in 12 small husks, scattered on a rather long head. The Arabs do not separate the darnel from the wheat, unless by means of a fan or sieve, after threshing (Matt. 13:25-30). If left to mingle with the bread, it occasions dizziness, and often acts as an emetic.²

In the last century in India, there were occasions where bad seed, which produced foul-smelling seed which damaged the good seed, was sown in another's field by an enemy.³ In his book, **Word Meanings In The New Testament**, Ralph Earle asked, "Would anyone do such a dirty trick? Henry Alford tells how in a field belonging to him someone maliciously sowed charlock over the wheat."⁴ There is a story which this writer has often told to illustrate the truth that we reap what we sow (Gal. 6:9), which also reveals what people will do if there is malice in the heart.

It seems that some boys were continually crossing a field, and the farmer decided to stop them by erecting a No Trespassing sign on his land. This made one of the boys so angry that he vowed that he would get even with

the farmer, so he went to the feed store and bought a supply of Johnson grass seed, and sowed every field fully. Later on he fell in love with the farmer's daughter, and they were married. When the old man died, he inherited the farm and spent the rest of his life fighting Johnson grass. If you do not understand the situation he faced, then you have never lived on a farm.⁵

Enemies can do much lasting evil. Jesus conveyed this idea in the parable of the tares. Jesus said, "the kingdom of heaven is likened to a man which sowed good seed in his field" (Matt. 13:24). The kingdom or church is not likened to

the field in which the tares and wheat were both sown, nor to the enemy who sowed the tares, but to the man who sowed the good seed. The kingdom does what the sower is doing. It sows the good seed.⁶

Later, the sower will be identified as the Son of man. The Son of man sows the seed today through His servants. That which His seed produces is more faithful servants of the Lord. The parable of the sower relates the different types of soil that one may find as he sows the seed of the Word of God. It speaks of the enemy catching away the good seed (13:19). The parable of the tares expounds further upon the work of the devil. It presents a devil who follows the sower of the Word with his basket containing another kind of seed, the seed of error, which he tries to scatter wherever the good seed of the Word falls. It tells us that someone else is sowing too! This explains the problems and obstacles faced by the church of the Lord in sowing seeds of truth. It presents the source of evil—Satan. It teaches us that the time will come at the Day of Judgment when the good will be separated from the evil and rewards and punishments will be given. Until then we must be diligent in our efforts to save ourselves and others.

The Sowers Of The Seed (Matt. 13:37, 39)

Who are the sowers of the seed? They are identified by Jesus. In Matthew 13:37, “He answered and said unto them, He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man.” Jesus often used the title **Son of man** with reference to Himself. It indicates His humanity and also His Messiahship. The householder who owned the field and sowed the seed, in the parable, represents Jesus Christ. Our Lord uses His servants today to sow the good seed in His field (compare Eph. 2:17-3:8 to John 14:1-2). He has commissioned us to do this (Luke 24:46-47; Acts 8:4). Christians are obligated to use their time, effort, and financial resources in the business of sowing the seed of the kingdom, in order that sons of the kingdom may be the result of sowing good seed.

Jesus also identified the enemy which sowed the tares in His field. He does not leave us to guess as to who it is. He said, “The enemy that sowed them is the devil” (Matt. 13:39). To be successful sowers for the Son of man, we must know our enemy. He is not just an abstract idea or simply the personification of the principle of evil. In the Bible, he is constantly viewed as a real personality. Personal names and personal pronouns are used with reference to him. Personal acts and attributes are ascribed to him. Satan is a living, literal being with the power to influence people and to perform many evil deeds. He is the adversary of both God and man. We must not underestimate him. He has been all too successful in destroying men because men have underestimated him. The devil loves to be compared to just a clown in a red suit with a forked tail, horns, and an ugly face—just someone to be laughed at and shrugged off. In the movie **The Greatest Story Ever Told**, Christ is led up into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. Their portrayal of the devil was a physically repulsive, dark-eyed character, lurking in the

shadows. And this writer disgustingly adds that they pictured him as being **bald!**

Satan's mission is to destroy the human race in hell. He seeks whom he may devour (1 Pet. 5:8). Luke 8:12 says, "Those by the way side are they that hear; then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved." He lays his snares before us (1 Tim. 3:7). He sows his tares in the world. All seed that produces children of the devil is from the devil. John 8:44 teaches that the devil is the father of all that is false. Therefore, all false doctrines in the world are a result of seed sown by the devil and his servants. Brother Roy Lanier, Sr. wrote:

Since it is the devil who sows all the seed that produces something different from the kingdom, we must conclude that all human religious organizations have come into the world as a result of the activity of the devil and his servants. This will be construed by some as "hard doctrine," but it is better for us to learn these truths now, while we can profit by them, rather than to wait until we get into the judgment and learn to our sorrow that we have received and lived by false doctrines.⁷

Are we as zealous in our work for Christ as the devil is for his work? Once there was a woman who had the reputation of always being able to say something good about everyone, no matter how worthless the person might be. When asked what she could say good about the devil, she hesitated and then replied, "Well, there's one good thing I can say about him. **He's always on the job!**" Whenever there is a preacher in the pulpit, there is a devil in the pews. Whenever there is a child of God sowing the Word of God, you can be sure that the devil is sowing his tares.

The Seed That Was Sown (Matt. 13:38)

Jesus identifies the seed sown by the Son of man by saying, “the good seed are the children of the kingdom” (Matt. 13:38). In the parable of the sower, the seed is the Word of God. In this parable, the seed are the people in whom the Word of God has taken root. These are those who have been begotten by the Word of God (Jas. 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:22-23; John 1:12). Matthew 13:19 speaks of “the word of the kingdom.” That Word produces children of the kingdom. Those children will, in turn, produce fruit to the glory of God (John 15:8). Sowing the seed of the kingdom produces children who are of the kingdom, and in the kingdom (Col. 1:13). Sowing the seed of the kingdom will not produce a religious denomination or members of such. Their presence in the field of the world points to the fact that somebody has been sowing something other than the seed of the kingdom.

Jesus says, “the tares are the children of the wicked one” (Matt. 13:38). These are those who are the product of the sowing of the devil. They persist in their wrongdoing. They love the evil and hate the good. Jesus said to some of the Jews in His day, “Why do ye not understand my speech? even because ye cannot hear my word. Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do” (John 8:43-44). These children can resemble the children of the kingdom (cf. 2 Cor. 11:13-15), just as tares can resemble wheat: “Satan wants his children to resemble God’s children; false doctrine to assume a near likeness of the truth. His children, tares, are sickening; their doctrines are deadly.”⁸ Andy McClish has well summarized these ideas by saying, “Here, as in many other passages, we see that God knows of only two classes of people, serving two opposing masters, destined for two mutually exclusive ends.”⁹

The Setting For The Sowing (Matt. 13:38)

Jesus identified the setting for the sowing when He said, "The field is the world" (Matt. 13:38):

It is in connection with the "field" that the greatest difficulty has occurred, the greatest mistakes have been made, and the deepest injury has been done. Few words of Scripture are more plain; and yet few have been more grievously misunderstood and wrested. At the entrance of the inspired explanation, the expositor, bent on the defence of his own foregone conclusion, takes his stand, like a pointsman on a railway, and by one jerk turns the whole train into the wrong line. "The field is the world," said the Lord: "The field is the church," say the interpreters. It is wearisome to read the reasonings by which they endeavour to fortify their assumption. Having determined that the field is the church, they are compelled immediately to address themselves to the great practical question of discipline.¹⁰

The greatest controversy concerning the parable of the tares is over the meaning of the field in Matthew 13:38, and the kingdom in 13:41. There have been some who would have the field in this parable represent the church with the good and the evil continuing together until the judgment. They then try to teach that the church has no authority to withdraw fellowship from people. Clovis G. Chappell wrote:

The tare pulling endangers the wheat that grows beside it. We used to turn unworthy members out of the church. There are those today who lament the fact that this is no longer done. Far be it from me to argue for laxness. Yet I have some members in my own church that, so far as I am able to judge, are very unworthy. One of these is a husband and father. Suppose I pull up this ugly tare and fling him out of the field. It would possibly be no better than he deserves,

but I hesitate for these reasons: If love will not win him to a good life, ostracism will not.¹¹

This doctrine is false for several reasons. (1) Jesus said the field is the world. (2) Church discipline is clearly taught in the Bible (Matt. 18:15-17; 2 Tim. 3:5; Tit. 3:10). Our interpretation of a parable must not contradict other plain passages. (3) The motive of the servants was not to disfellowship the tares but to destroy them. We disfellowship out of Christian love, in order that one might come to their senses and be saved, not to destroy them.

Some members of the Lord's church do not teach the preceding false doctrine but do maintain that the field represents the kingdom or church in the world. Brother Burton Coffman wrote, "It is in this frame of reference that the view is held which makes 'the field' the church in the whole world."¹² The reason why this view is taken is often because of the use of the word **kingdom** in Matthew 13:41. In his comments on this verse, brother Coffman wrote, "Here again, in Jesus' explanation, are the words 'out of his kingdom,' indicating the area under consideration to be primarily the church, but on a world-wide scale."¹³ This writer maintains that the word **kingdom** in Matthew 13:41 refers to the world and not the church for the following reasons.

1. Jesus said the field is the world. The tares are gathered out of the same place in which they were planted. They were planted in the field, which is the world. Therefore, the word **kingdom** in this verse must have reference to the world.

2. All men, good and bad, are represented by the wheat and the tares: "To say that the wicked who are judged and punished are the hypocrites in the church, would leave all the wicked out in the world without judgment and punishment."¹⁴

3. The kingdom of heaven is not said to be like the field in this parable. Remember that Jesus said that “The kingdom of heaven is **likened unto a man which sowed good seed** in his field” (13:24, emp. mine throughout, MM). Later, Jesus will identify the man as the Son of man. So, the kingdom is to do what the sower or Son of man is represented as doing. Christ’s mission is the mission of the church or kingdom. The church sows the good seed. It is not the field. The field is the world in which the seed is sown.

4. H. Leo Boles listed the following reason as one which forced him to conclude that the word **kingdom** had a wider application in Matthew 13:41 than just to the church:

The good seed represent ‘the sons of the kingdom,’ those who accepted and submitted to the reign of Christ over the world. The tares represent all the children of the wicked one within the field, that is, all the wicked in the world.¹⁵

5. As E. G. Sewell says:

The word **kingdom** may mean **dominion**, and the dominion of Christ in a general sense extends over all the earth whether people serve him or not; and in the last day all the wicked in all the dominion of Christ and of God will be cast into the furnace of fire, where will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, whether in the church or out, nominally.¹⁶

All authority has been given to Christ in heaven and in earth (Matt. 28:18), for “The earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof, the world, and they that dwell therein” (Psm. 24:1):

The field, the world of creation, includes all human kind: those who willingly serve in

holiness, and those who are unwilling to serve Him in any way. No creature stands independent of God.¹⁷

In applying this parable, the householder represents Jesus Christ. He is the owner of the field. It is His field, and He says His field is the world. Incidentally, this demonstrates the great truth that the entire world is amenable to the Law of Christ. All men everywhere are accountable to the authority of the Son of God, which He exercises through His Word, and by which all men will be judged at the last day (John 12:48). It also demonstrates that the Gospel is for all. We are to go into all the world and preach the gospel (Mark 16:15). God loved the world (John 3:16). Christ died for the world that it, through Him, might be saved (John 3:17). Christians are, therefore, commissioned to preach the Gospel to the world. We are to sow the seed of the kingdom in Christ's field, that field over which He has all authority, the field of the world.

The Separation Of The Saints And The Sinners (Matt. 13:39-41)

The enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels. As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world. The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity (13:39-41).

The parable of the tares teaches the separation of all mankind at the end of this world. The harvest is the end of the world. The Greek phrase utilized here can mean end of the age. Those who hold to the A.D. 70 theory believe this refers to the fall of Jerusalem. Brother Roger Dickson also takes the view that this "reference is to the end of

national Israel in the destruction of Jerusalem” and that the “emphasis is upon the separation of those who are righteous by faith from those Jews who rejected Jesus or hypocritically accepted Him.” However, he would not agree completely with the A.D. 70 theorists, for he concludes his explanation of this parable by saying, “Though the primary reference of this parable is to God’s casting off of apostate Israel, the typology it carries of the final coming of Jesus and the judgement is certainly here.”¹⁸ The phrase “end of the world” also occurs in Matthew 28:20. In his comments on that verse, brother J. W. McGarvey said succinctly:

The term rendered **world** frequently means **age**: but whether we render it **world** or **age** in this place the meaning is the same, for the age referred to must be the Christian age, and this will end with the world itself.¹⁹

This writer believes brother McGarvey’s assessment is accurate.

At the end of the world, the sowing will finally end, the harvest will take place, and the Sower will then be the judge. Jesus will come again in all of His glory with His holy angels and shall sit upon the throne of His glory. So terrible will be that day that the earth and the heavens will flee away from the Judge’s face (Rev. 20:11-12). All will be resurrected (John 5:28-29). Abraham and Sarah will shake the dust off at Machpelah. Moses will arise from the unmarked grave in Moab. People of the past, and people living when Jesus comes, will all be gathered for the great separation. This material universe will pass away in that day (2 Pet. 3:10). Paul said in 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9:

And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ:

Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power.

His mighty angels will be His reapers on that day (Matt. 25:31). Humanity will be divided into two classes. Presently, we have various ways to classify people. Religiously, some people are classified as Catholic, Protestant, or Jew. In colleges and universities, students are classified as freshmen, sophomores, juniors, seniors, or graduate students. In the Day of Judgement, humanity will be in a wheat or tares classification, and the Sower will know the difference!

What does this text do to the doctrine of Universalism? The idea that a good, gracious, merciful, and loving God will not allow anyone to be lost may appeal to man's need for acceptance regardless of behavior; however, God's grace does not unconditionally make wheat out of tares! If God's grace is given to man unconditionally, what would keep all people from salvation? On the other hand, if God gives His grace unconditionally to a select number—namely, the wheat—then on what basis does God decide those who become the recipients of His grace? Did He from eternity choose those who would be the wheat and foreordain that others would be the tares?

People may assume some interesting positions in efforts to escape human responsibility. However, our Lord's picture of judgement involving the wheat and the tares holds men accountable for what they have done and makes them responsible to the Lord for their decisions and behavior. Those children of the wicked one who have born fruit for the devil, who have caused stumbling, and who have chosen to do iniquity will be punished as tares. A permissive generation may have trouble accepting this great separation of humanity into two eternal groups, the

wheat and the tares, but these words of our Lord very plainly reveal the reality of just such a separation!

Many who believe the doctrine of Premillennialism contend that the return of Christ will usher in a millennial reign in which Christ will occupy an earthly throne in Jerusalem. Immediately prior to these events, they teach that Jesus will secretly carry away His saints in the **rapture** for a period of seven years, during which time a great tribulation will fall on those who are left behind. After the seven years of tribulation, Jesus will come again to establish an earthly, millennial kingdom. There are many passages such as Revelation 1:7; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17; and John 5:28-29; 6:54; and 12:48 which refute this false doctrine. But notice also that the parable of the tares teaches that there will be no separation of good and evil until the end of the world (Matt. 13:49-50). It denies the rapture theory.

It also reveals that the Son of man is sowing the Seed of the kingdom now and that it is producing sons of the kingdom. The sowing of the Seed will continue until the time of harvest. The first time the Seed of the kingdom was ever sown was when the Gospel was first preached by the apostles on the day of Pentecost, and three thousand children of the kingdom were produced. All of the sowing of the Seed of the kingdom is represented as being between the first sowing and its harvest. Therefore, we may correctly conclude that the kingdom or church of Christ on earth extends from the first preaching of the Gospel on the Day of Pentecost until the end of the world when the angels will come to take the good into glory and to punish the bad in hell.²⁰ At that time, this earth will be burned up (2 Pet. 3:10). All mankind will stand before the judgment throne to give account of their deeds (2 Cor. 5:10). The sons of the kingdom and the children of the wicked one will be eternally separated. Will we be among the saints or the sinners?

The Suffering Of The Sinners (Matt. 13:42)

Jesus referred to the suffering of the sinners when He said that His reapers, the angels, would cast the children of the wicked one “into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth” (13:42). A recent Gallup poll revealed that 77% of all Americans believe there is a heaven and yet only 58% believe in hell. Yet, Jesus taught the reality of hell.²¹ The New Testament uses the Greek term **gehenna** to refer to eternal hell. This term is used an even dozen times in the New Testament (Matt. 5:22, 29-30; 10:28; 18:8; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43-47; Luke 12:5; Jas. 3:6). Without exception, it refers to eternal punishment. It is significant that, during His personal ministry, Jesus used this term eleven of the twelve times inspiration employed it.

In addition to the eleven passages already cited, Jesus spoke of hell and described it by using other terms. In Matthew 13:42, He spoke of it as a furnace of fire (cf. 5:22; 18:9). Later, in this same chapter, while giving the parable of the net, Jesus said:

So shall it be at the end of the world: the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just, And shall cast them into **the furnace of fire**: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth (13:49-50).

How can a person possibly listen to these words spoken by Jesus Christ and still say there is no such thing as hell? The Lord spoke of the fires of hell as being unquenchable in Mark 9:43, 48. The word **gehenna** originated from the valley of Himmon on the south side of Jerusalem where idolatrous Jews once burned their children in sacrifice unto Molech. Over time it became the garbage dump of the city. The fires were continually burning there to consume the trash. Worms infested the

refuse. Such is the awful picture our Lord used to describe hell. It represents those who shall be cast into hell to be burned and yet not be consumed.

Jesus also spoke of hell as a place where there will be “wailing and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 13:42; cf. Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30). There is a story of a street preacher who was standing in front of the United Nations Building in New York City trying to get the attention of those who passed by. He urged those near him to flee from the wrath to come. “I warn you,” he roared, “that there will be weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth!” An old woman in the crowd shouted snidely: “Sir, I have no teeth!” “Lady,” the evangelist retorted, “teeth will be provided!”

Our Lord could not have indicated an eternity of torment any clearer than by the expression “wailing and gnashing of teeth.” The isolation and the fire did not stop their agony; it is pictured as causing it. Since they are weeping in the fire, these souls were conscious and not annihilated! Jesus said in Matthew 25:46, “And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.” The same Greek word is translated as “everlasting” and “eternal” in that verse. This word conveys the idea of that which is unceasing, endless, and perpetual. If the word means “without end” when applied to the future blessedness of the saved, it must also mean “without end” when describing the future punishment of the lost. When we consider these words of Jesus about hell from the parable of the tares, is it not worth every effort and every sacrifice on our part that we might enter eternity prepared to meet God?

The Shining Of The Saints (Matt. 13:43)

Jesus concluded His explanation of the parable of the tares by saying, “Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Who hath ears

to hear, let him hear” (13:43). Jesus plainly identifies the wheat as the righteous (cf. Matt. 13:30, 38). God makes men righteous by forgiving them. We can become righteous in God’s sight and a son of the kingdom by faith in Christ (John 8:24), repentance from past sins (Luke 13:3), confession of Christ (Rom. 10:9-10), and baptism for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38). When God has made people right in His sight, they then have the responsibility for continuing to do that which is right in the sight of God: “Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as He is righteous” (1 John 3:7).

The picture of hell which Jesus has given in the parable of the tares is so frightening, so horrible, so terribly unimaginable, that it boldly challenges us to do what is necessary to escape its horrors. There is a hell to shun and a heaven to be won. Hell was originally prepared for the devil and his angels (Matt. 25:41), but heaven is the place prepared in the Father’s house just for the saints of God (John 14:2)! This eternal reward will be given not at the point of death, but at the second coming of Christ when Jesus comes to take us back with Him (14:3). Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.

The word “then” in Matthew 13:43 refers to the time just after the harvest at the end of the world. In 1 Corinthians 15:24, Paul says that Jesus will deliver up His kingdom to the Father. In its heavenly state, nothing that defileth shall enter into it (Rev. 21:27). It will shine forth as golden wheat swaying in a field. We shall be glorified as God’s own and gathered into His barn (Matt. 13:30). The expression “into my barn” symbolizes the safekeeping of God. The prophet Daniel referred to this blessed time when he wrote by inspiration, “And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever” (Dan. 12:3).

Conclusion

The parable of the tares is rich in meaning: “Who hath ears to hear, let him hear” (Matt. 13:43). There is much evil in the world. There are many obstacles to be faced. Satan is our enemy (1 Pet. 5:8). We must resist him now (5:9) and flourish as God’s wheat in the field of the world. A day of harvest and separation is coming: “the God of all grace...hath called us unto His eternal glory by Christ Jesus (5:10). As Christians are we like the Son of man Who sows the good seed? Are we doing His work? As Fred Fillmore wrote:

Are you sowing the seed of the kingdom, brother,
in the heat of the noon-day’s glare? For the
harvest-time is coming on, And the reaper’s work
will soon be done; Will your sheaves be many?
Will you garner any, For the gath’ring at the
harvest home?

Songs such as “Sowing The Seed Of The Kingdom” admonish us to do God’s work in this world of sin. Only in the harvest time will we truly be able to know how much eternal good we have done.

Who Sowed The Seed?

Who sowed the seed? None could recall.
But somewhere, in the bygone years,
A toiler in the ground let fall
A seed that in the soil took hold,
And through long months of heat and cold,
Increased and spread, till now appears
An annual harvest of rich gold.

Who planted the tree? Nobody knew.
But someone, sometime, set it out,
And it through rain and sunshine grew,
Although no eye was near to see,
Till from the little tender sprout
There came a sheltering giant tree

And many a pilgrim breathed a prayer
Of thanks for him who put it there.

Who sowed Good Seed? Perhaps not now,
But in eternity we'll know,
The Master then will tell us how
Some gentle soul, devoid of fame,
Proclaimed a truth in His Great Name,
Showed someone else the way to go.
And then another, seeing the light,
Turned from the way of doubt and wrong,
And followed the pathway of the right
And thus the good work moved along.
But only in Heaven will it be known
By whom the original seed was sown.

C. R. Brewer

Endnotes

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CHAPTER 15

The Parables Of The Hidden Treasure And Pearl Of Great Price

Dub McClish

Introduction

THE *DICKSON NEW ANALYTICAL Bible* lists thirty-one parables spoken by our Lord. Since we deny that the account of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) is a parable, our list contains only thirty. The frequency with which Jesus employed this story-form to teach a wide spectrum of lessons signals to us that they were one of His favorite vehicles of instruction. He obviously considered them very effective.

Parable is actually an anglicized Greek word, **parabole**. This compound word means to throw down (**bole**) something beside (**para**) something else. Hence, a parable consists of a story involving human experiences which illustrates one or more spiritual truths. These elongated figures of speech always involve events that either have happened or could happen. Unlike fables, they do not employ impossible or unnatural scenes (e.g., talking animals, trees, etc.). Jesus stated all of the “kingdom parables” in Matthew 13, except the parable of the sower, in the form of similes: “The kingdom of heaven is likened

unto..." (v. 24; et al.).¹ Thus, in these parables we have a figure of speech (simile) within a figure of speech (parable).²

Parables generally have only one or, at most, a very few intended lessons. We should beware of mistaking the mere "drapery" or "scenery" of parables for the actual lessons. Some elements of every parable are there only to complete the realism of the story, and they have no further meaning. We should always seek to grasp the lesson or lessons of each parable we study.

We naturally study the parables of the hidden hoard and the precious pearl together because the major emphasis of both of them is the same.

Background Information

Circumstantial Background Of The Parables

These twin parables were the aftermath of a sermon Jesus preached by the seaside near Capernaum. This was His famous sermon preached from a boat to a large crowd on the seashore (Matt. 13:1-3). Apparently, the Christ had not previously spoken in parables before He began this rapid-fire delivery of them. The apostles were curious about why He began thus speaking (v. 10). He answered that He did so in order to convey to them (i.e., the apostles) essential elements of "the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven," while concealing them from the Jews, especially the scribes and Pharisees (v. 11). They had proved themselves unworthy of this knowledge by closing their eyes and ears and hardening their hearts to His message, even as their fathers had done in the time of Isaiah (vv. 13-16).

The Lord then treated the apostles (and us) to what we might appropriately think of as a class called "The Parables 101." He explained the meaning of the first parable, the parable of the sower, to the apostles (vv. 18-23). He then immediately addressed the multitude again

with additional parables (the tares, mustard seed, and leaven) (vv. 24-33). At this point He departed from the crowd and was with the disciples alone (v. 36a). Here, at their request, He explained to the apostles the parable of the tares (vv. 36b-43). He then told them the parables of the treasure and the pearl, followed by the parable of the dragnet (vv. 44-50).

Following these three parables, Jesus asked the twelve if they understood their meaning, to which they answered they did. It appears that the Lord told them the meaning of the first two parables not only to teach them their meaning, but also to instruct them in how to interpret and apply subsequent parables He would tell them. He then told them additional parables, and they were able to comprehend their meanings without His guidance.

Historical Background Of The Hidden Treasure Parable

People in the first century did not have banks or safes in which to secure their gold, silver, gems, costly raiment, or other valuables. If they carried them on their persons, they were in danger of being mugged [as was the man on his way to Jericho (Luke 10:30)]. It was therefore a common thing for men to hide their valuables in the safest places they could find. Sometimes they would hide them in their houses, but this was not very safe. Thieves could “break (lit., “dig”) through and steal” one’s earthly treasures (Matt. 6:19).

The man to whom his master entrusted the one talent “went away and digged in the earth, and hid his lord’s money” (Matt. 25:18). That someone might dig a hole and bury his fortune in a field was a familiar occurrence to Jesus’ listeners. Also, it likely was not uncommon for people to discover such a treasure occasionally. Did Jesus observe a man sowing seed in his field and point to him as He told the parables of the sower and the tares (13:3, 24)? Had

someone in the area of Capernaum discovered just such a treasure in a field? We are not told whether this was so in either case. However, neither possibility is far-fetched.

We are naturally curious about several things Jesus did not include in the parable. Where was the owner of the treasure? Why did the property owner not know about the treasure? Had the one who buried it died, forgetting to tell his descendants (who inherited the land) about it? Had the landowner buried it in his youth and forgotten he did so or, perhaps, where he did so, in his dotage? Surely, if the burier still owned the field and had merely forgotten where he buried the treasure, he would have retained the property in hopes of someday finding it.

What about the ethics of the finder? Was he dishonest to keep his serendipity secret from the owner while he purchased the field? Some think this behavior was immoral and dishonest. However, others cite Jewish law at that time, which explicitly granted keepers rights to anything one found. Jesus makes no comment concerning this man's guilt or innocence. The ethics of the finder in the parable are totally apart from Jesus' object in telling it. To center on such questions as how the cache came to be forgotten and whether or not the finder acted ethically is to fall into the trap of confusing parabolic scenery with substance. Jesus did not satisfy such questions because their answers are not germane to His lessons.

Assuredly, all of the details the Lord included in this parable were in harmony with the experience, or at least the possible experience, of His hearers.

Historical Background Of The Precious Pearl Parable

In the previous parable, Jesus used some unspecified kind of treasure to make His point. In this parable He used a specific kind of treasure, greatly valued by first-

century Orientals—pearls. Pearls are mentioned only a few times in the Bible, but always in such a way as to emphasize their great worth.

Reportedly, Cleopatra owned two pearls worth \$400,000 each—pearls of great price indeed! Historians indicate that some people valued them not only for their monetary worth, but they desired them just to look at, to hold, and to roll between thumb and finger. Some made their living buying and selling these gems of the ocean. The principal character in this parable was such a merchant.

As before, there are also some questions concerning this parable about which we may be curious. Where was this merchant's home? How long had he been trading pearls, and how long had he been searching for the pearl of pearls? What did he do with the pearl after his purchase? Was it perhaps of sufficient worth that he could use it to obtain a comfortable retirement? As noted in connection with the previous parable, such questions all relate to the mere drapery of the story. They have no bearing on the Lord's lesson, and He thus ignored them. Jesus used the stingiest economy of details and words that would still allow Him to make His point

The Parables Compared And Contrasted

Both parables tell of two men who found treasures. The lessons these parables teach closely parallel each other. Perhaps their principal lesson is to emphasize (by means of a lost treasure in a field or a priceless pearl in the market) the incomparable value of the kingdom of heaven, the church. The several other lessons they hold would seem to flow from this principal point. Because the kingdom is so valuable: (1) It is attainable only by sacrifice. (2) It is worth whatever sacrifice or loss is necessary to "acquire" (enter) it. (3) There should be a

sense of urgency about doing whatever is required to “obtain” it. (4) There is joy at discovering and procuring it.

The major contrast between the parables is the manner in which the respective men came to find their treasures. There is no indication that the man who discovered the hidden treasure was searching for it. He seems to have stumbled upon it while doing something else. It was thus a serendipity for him. Neither Saul of Tarsus nor the jailer in Philippi was looking for the Gospel Truth when it was suddenly made apparent to them. Yet, both of them readily recognized its worth and “bought” it by their Gospel obedience. Contrariwise, the man who found the pearl did so because he was on a quest for it and perhaps had been for a long time. He believed it was out there, and he was determined to find it. This man typifies individuals such as the Ethiopian eunuch and Cornelius, both of whom were apparently sincerely seeking to know and do God’s will when, in God’s gracious providence, He made it possible for them to find the Truth and the kingdom.

What Did Jesus’ Hearers Understand From These Parables?

We can do little more than offer some possibilities concerning what or how much the original auditors may have learned as they listened to these parables. Remember that Jesus spoke both of them (along with the parable of the dragnet) to the apostles alone, rather than to the people in general. We have already noticed that He gave them somewhat of a template for interpreting His parables by interpreting the first two for them. After He told these last three parables, He asked them if they understood. They said that they did.

What did the apostles understand upon hearing these parables? While we cannot with certainty know all that

they may have gleaned from them, they understood them to some degree at least. The Lord asked them if they understood, and they answered affirmatively (v. 51). These men would have had to be incredibly dense (which we do not believe they were) not to understand at least the following point from these parables: the kingdom possesses intrinsic and incomparable value.

We know at least one thing they did not understand in spite of all of the “kingdom parables” and other relevant teaching done by the Lord: the spiritual nature of the kingdom of heaven. Even after Jesus’ resurrection, they apparently still held the common Jewish misconception that He would restore the literal, political, Davidic kingdom and throne (Acts 1:6).

It is likely that the apostles did not grasp some of the applications and meanings of the parables (e.g., the nature of the kingdom, as noted above) until after Jesus ascended and sent the Holy Spirit upon them. When He sent the Spirit, the Lord promised that the Spirit would teach them all things and bring to their remembrance all that He said to them (John 14:26). The Spirit would guide them into all the Truth, which included the things He taught them in person but which they did not understand (16:13). We can imagine that, in light of the fullness of remembrance and revelation, the apostles must have often reflected in post-Pentecost days on all of the parables and their rich content.

Application Number One: The Intrinsic Value Of The Kingdom

As indicated above, this writer believes that the central message/lesson in both of these brief parables is the intrinsic and incomparable worth of the kingdom. One does not have to study very long or far in the Bible to comprehend some of the reasons why the kingdom is so valuable.

Because Of God's Preparation For Its Establishment

The kingdom of the parables is the church, which is “according to the eternal purpose which he (God) purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Eph. 3:9-11). The kingdom was thus planned in the mind of the Godhead before time began. Through the centuries God carefully, purposefully moved in His providence through the actions of men to bring His eternal kingdom into reality. At least as early as the time of faithful Abraham, God began dropping hints about the kingdom that He would one day establish. From that time on the Old Testament is rife with promises, prophecies, types, and shadows prefiguring and promoting the eternal kingdom.

Finally, God determined it was time: “But when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth his Son” (Gal. 4:4). John, the Lord’s forerunner, was sent before Him, proclaiming “Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 3:2). After His baptism of John and His victory over Satan in the wilderness, Jesus began to preach “Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (4:17). Jesus appointed twelve men to be His apostles. The first commission under which they labored involved preaching “The kingdom of heaven is at hand” (10:7). He later promised to build His church and, in the same breath, told the apostles that the kingdom would be established in the lifetime of some of them (16:18-19, 28; cf. Mark 9:1).

On the Pentecost following the resurrection and ascension of the Lord, the church/kingdom of God and of Christ was established, according to Luke’s history in Acts 2. God worked out His plan for the kingdom of His Son so meticulously that the prophets could foretell intricate details concerning its beginning hundreds of years in advance. Isaiah, Daniel, and Joel all flawlessly predicted the time of its inception (Isa. 2:2-4; Dan. 2:44; Joel 2:28-32).

Isaiah also named Jerusalem as its place of origin, along with events that would surround its beginning (Isa. 2:2-4).

One must be utterly ignorant, undiscerning, or perverse to miss the point that the kingdom/church is an incomparable treasure. The fact that it occupied the center of God's attention for unknown ages amply demonstrates its value if nothing else does.

Because Of Its Cost

The value and cost of an item are always related. The general rule is that the greater the cost, the higher the value, and vice versa. It is axiomatic that every building that is erected and every institution that is founded involve cost. So it is with the houses in which we live, the vehicles in which we ride, the companies which we own or for which we work. This cost-to-build principle applies to the spiritual kingdom as much as it does to any material entity.

This writer will not be able to express fully the extent of the cost of building/establishing the kingdom. The cost is so immense that it is likely that mere humans cannot fully comprehend all of the cost involved. However, the Bible gives us some indications to enable us to appreciate the price God had to pay to bring the kingdom into being.

Christ valued the church so greatly that Paul said He paid the ultimate price of His blood for it (Acts 20:28). His blood was not merely that of a good man shed by evil men, although He was surely a good man. The blood of many good men and women has been shed by evildoers, but it could not purchase the church of Christ. His blood was not merely that of a martyr for a good cause, although this description of Him is not false. However, there have been many martyrs for good causes, but their blood could not purchase the kingdom of God. He was far more than a martyr. The ultimate value of His blood, making it the sufficient price for the church, lies in the fact that it was

perfectly innocent, sinless blood. Of Him alone can it be said that He “hath been in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15; cf. Isa. 53:9, 11; 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 7:26; 9:28; 1 Pet. 2:22; 1 John 3:5).

Paul not only spoke of the great cost of the church, but he also wrote about it. The apostle declared that Christ loved and esteemed the church so much that He “gave himself up for it” (Eph. 5:25). Christ had no gold or silver, no jewels, houses, or lands, which He could give for the kingdom. Had He possessed such they would never have been a sufficient price anyway, though He owned them all. All that He had was Himself—His perfect blood. The fact that the Christ, the sinless Son of God, held back nothing to make the kingdom a reality places the value of that institution beyond our ability to calculate and assimilate.

We should not marvel that this same apostle described the church as “the fulness of him (Christ) that filleth all in all” (Eph. 1:22-23). Surely none can question the value of the kingdom upon seeing the immensity of its cost.

Because Of Its Destiny

As God’s messenger, Nathan prophesied that David’s son would be given a throne in a kingdom that would last forever (2 Sam. 7:12-13, 16). Five centuries before the Christ came, Daniel predicted that, in the days of the Roman rulers, God would set up a kingdom that would stand forever and that would never be destroyed (Dan. 2:44). When Jesus was born, the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that God would give Him the throne of His father David and an unending kingdom (Luke 1:32-33).

The inspired writer referred to “the church of the firstborn” (Heb. 12:23) and then, in the same context, alluded to the church as “a kingdom that cannot be shaken”

(v. 28). When the Lord comes and raises the dead, “Then cometh the end, when he shall deliver up the kingdom to God, even the Father” (1 Cor. 15:24). Again, after the resurrection, the Lord’s people (i.e., His kingdom) will “be caught up in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:17). Just as Christ is head of His church, so is He also the Savior of it (Eph. 5:23). This promise is not to save His people from the normal problems, toils, and tears of this life, but to save them eternally.

The church/kingdom of Christ is the only institution of any kind on earth that will not eventually perish, whether from inner corruption, financial failure, destruction by enemies, death, or due to the destruction of all things at the end: “The kingdoms of earth pass away one by one, but the kingdom of heaven remains!” When the Lord comes, “then cometh the end” (1 Cor. 15:24), when “the earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up” (2 Pet. 3:10). Jesus warned specifically of religious “plants”: “Every plant which my heavenly Father planted not, shall be rooted up” (Matt 15:13).

The Lord’s kingdom is built upon two solid rocks. First, it is built upon the Deity and Sonship of Christ Himself: “Upon this rock I will build my church,” He declared (Matt. 16:18; cf. 21:42; Acts 4:11; Eph. 2:20; 1 Pet. 2:6-7). Second, like the house of the wise man, it is built upon the solid rock of the Word of Christ (Matt. 7:24-25). As long as it remains upon these immovable foundations, its destiny is secure. However, when it strays from them (and to leave one is to abandon both), it becomes merely a human institution, the destiny of which is destruction and damnation rather than salvation. Nothing but the kingdom of Christ has an eternal destiny with God, promised and secured by God. This fact alone demonstrates the incomprehensible value of the kingdom.

The value of the kingdom of heaven is intrinsic. Its worth abides and remains regardless of what men may think of it. Many would not recognize a treasure or a pearl if they saw it. We have read how a certain nineteenth-century Pennsylvania farmer complained of the messy black scum that constantly polluted the streams on his land, making them unfit for his cattle. None wanted to buy his land because of the pollution, so he sold it far at below market price. The “messy black scum” turned out to be oil seeping to the surface, and the first oil well was drilled on what had been his property. He had this immensely valuable treasure all about him, but he did not perceive its value. The oil was nonetheless valuable, however, even if he and many others failed to recognize it.

So it is with the kingdom. Many have grown up hearing the Gospel but have never obeyed it. Many were reared by godly parents who loved and valued the kingdom. These children were taught properly, and they obeyed the Gospel, but, upon going out on their own, they sacrificed the kingdom for the trinkets of the world and the errors of men. Others by the millions believe sincerely that they are in the kingdom, but they have been so confused by human doctrines that they have accepted only a cheap counterfeit religion for the real kingdom. Most men value the church of the Lord little or not at all, and it will always be this way, according to the Lord (Matt. 7:13-14). In fact, in this age of warped thinking and cultural abnormalities, more and more people seem to think of the Lord’s kingdom and the Bible as sources of harm and danger in the world. None of the wrong attitudes about the kingdom and its incalculable value decrease its worth at all, however, even if all men should reject it.

Application Number Two: The Kingdom Is Entered Only By Sacrifice

This principle is unmistakable and unavoidable in the parables. The men in both parables sold all that they had in order to secure their respective treasures. We cannot help contrasting the “rich young ruler” with these men. In answer to his question about obtaining eternal life, Jesus told him that he must sell his possessions and give to the poor, then follow Him (Matt. 19:21). He was unwilling to do what the men in the parables did (v. 22).

Time after time, the Lord and His inspired writers challenge us with the message that we must be willing to give up whatever prevents us from laying hold on and faithfully serving in the kingdom with its hope of eternal life. As prevalent as this teaching is, it is fearful to contemplate how few even in the kingdom—much less those in the world—comprehend it. Consider a few key, representative statements.

Jesus urged in the Sermon on the Mount: “But seek ye first his kingdom, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matt. 6:33). He plainly declared that those who would be His disciples must make sacrifices: “And he said unto all, If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me” (Luke 9:23).

Paul provided a powerful example of “selling all that he had” for the kingdom when he was converted:

Howbeit what things were gain to me, these have I counted loss for Christ. Yea verily, and I count all things to be loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but refuse, that I may gain Christ (Phil. 3:7-8).

He urged those who are already in the kingdom to live sacrificial and holy lives, in order to be acceptable to God (Rom. 12:1-2).

What sorts of sacrifices does the Bible challenge us to make for the sake of the kingdom?

1. Human traditions and doctrines, which produce vain worship (Matt. 15:6-9).

2. Kindred who reject us if we obey the Gospel (10:34-37).

3. Material possessions, if they are more important than following Christ (19:21-22).

4. Career and reputation that contradict entering and serving in the kingdom (Phil. 3:5-7).

5. Suffering persecution, even dying, may be necessary (1 Pet. 3:14-17; 4:16-19; Rev. 2:10).

Jesus summarized this doctrine for us: one must be willing to lose his life (sacrifice whatever is necessary, even life itself) in order to save it by “buying” the kingdom (Luke 9:24). The thief must quit stealing. The filthy-tongued must cease his profanity. The adulterer and fornicator must give up his immorality. The drunkard and illicit-drug user must cast these aside. The lazy person must arise from his bed of indolence. One in religious error must leave behind his false doctrines and practices.

Without controversy, this teaching is challenging, hard, drastic—even radical in a believe-everything or believe-nothing world. Yet also, without controversy, Jesus thus unapologetically and repeatedly challenged men to so think and behave. None ever followed Him without knowing the cost of discipleship and without being urged to count the cost of it.

For lack of emphasis on this disturbing (but fundamentally necessary) teaching, millions have been enticed by the Billy Grahams to make a shallow, emotional profession of discipleship. These folk know little or nothing of the Truth about the plan of salvation, the nature of the kingdom/church, true worship, or even Biblical morality. They make no connection between love and obedience (John 14:15; et al.); faith and works (Gal. 5:6; Jas. 2:17-24;

et al.); and baptism, salvation, and entering the kingdom (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38, 41, 47; et al.).

Likewise, tens of thousands of those who have their names on the rolls of churches of Christ have never risen above the convenience level in their religion. Many of these are “doctrinally” conservative. However, they find it more convenient to stay home on Sunday nights, Wednesday nights, and during Gospel meetings than to assemble with the saints. It is more convenient to give \$10 per week than \$100. It is more convenient to remain silent than to try to teach their friends the Gospel. It would be inconvenient (and a bit painful) to refuse to make the moral compromises at work that would guarantee a raise in pay or a promotion. About ten percent of the members do the great majority of the work in most local churches because the ninety percent are unwilling to sacrifice anything for the kingdom.

The root problem of the liberal element in the church (if we can admit that they are still in it) is unwillingness to pay the price to be the Lord’s true people. They want the crown with no cross, the blessings without the bother, of the exclusive kingdom. Unwilling to be bound by the law of Christ, liberals have substituted their own ooey-goey, touchy-feely, sentimental definition of the love of Christ. They reason that the Lord would not want a man to remain unmarried although he divorced his first wife because she snored loudly. They would never leave the intolerant impression that the church of Christ is the one Jesus built and will save eternally. Surely, the God of grace does not consider instrumental music a heaven-or-hell issue.

Repentance is the scripturally-specified point at which kingdom-buying life changes take place. In repentance, one first decides to sell all and buy—to cast aside things that offend God and are incompatible with the kingdom of Christ. Then, repentance is perfected when

one alters his behavior to reflect his decision to do so. Repentance is therefore the crux of real conversion (transformation, change, rebirth), the step in which one pays whatever price he must respectively pay to “obtain” the kingdom treasure. This price includes baptism unto the remission of sins for every accountable person who has lived since the cross (John 3:5). We should therefore not be amazed that repent or perish (Luke 13:3) is a constant theme of the New Testament, yea, of the entire Bible. The message of these two parables (indeed of the New Testament) is that there is no price too great to pay for the treasure of the kingdom!

**Application Number Three:
When Men See The Kingdom’s Value
They Willingly Sell All To Have It**

Both parables depict the men in them as willingly, without hesitation, disposing of their assets to obtain the treasure they found. In their case, this was necessary to gather the funds required in exchange for the treasure. In our case, though we possessed the wealth of the entire world, we could not purchase membership in the kingdom. The Lord paid that price, which no man could ever pay. However, the principle that we must “pay the price”—surrender whatever would separate us from Christ, as those men had to surrender all they had—applies fully to all men since Calvary.

The man who found the treasure was so happy over his discovery that “in his joy” he sold his other goods. Although not stated, we may fairly infer the same of the pearl merchant—he wasted no time but immediately gathered all of his assets with which to purchase the priceless pearl. Contrast again the behaviors and attitudes of these men with those of the rich young ruler

alluded to earlier. Significantly, Matthew says that, when Jesus told him to sell his possessions, give to the poor, and follow Him, “he went away sorrowful,” unwilling to pay the “price” of eternal life (Matt. 19:22).

Did either man in these parables wring his hands, quibble over the price, or grieve over his “sacrifices”? Not for one moment! Both men perceived that the value of their purchases far outweighed the prices they were paying. They knew that, even in giving all that they had for these treasures, they were still getting a bargain and would eventually reap a huge profit.

We have already established the value of the kingdom. Those who have sufficient wisdom to understand its value never argue or quibble over the price to obtain it. Some want to steal salvation and the kingdom by offering nothing in exchange for it. Dyed-in-the-wool-Calvinists, Universalists, and certain of our brethren tinged with a bit of both of these errors tell us that we can do nothing toward our own salvation—it is all up to God. We say to them: **read these parables!** Some are willing to pay something to obtain the kingdom, if they can name their own price. Many are willing to believe intellectually in and confess the Deity claims of Christ. However, when it comes to repentance, they start haggling over the price. Those unscripturally married—thus living in adultery—are seldom willing to give up an ineligible spouse for the kingdom. Rather, they devise ingenious “explanations” of Matthew 19:9 and 1 Corinthians 7.

Very few of these “believers” are willing to be baptized as part of the “price.” [In fact, they argue that to require baptism is actually an attempt to purchase/earn salvation by a work of human effort or merit. This is absolutely not the case, as many passages indicate (e.g., Tit. 3:5).] Yet, the Pentecostians rebuke sharply the attitude of all who argue that baptism is not essential to salvation. When

Peter told them to repent and be baptized unto the remission of their sins, rather than argue and quibble, they “gladly received his word” and “were baptized” (Acts 2:38, 41, KJV). When one argues over baptism (or any other requirement of the Lord) he has not “gladly received the word.” Likewise, when one correctly values his soul and the kingdom, he will never argue about the necessity of baptism or any other of the Lord’s requirements.

Let us now give more attention to the attitude of joy that characterized the treasure-buyers and which typifies true spiritual treasure-hunters. We have just seen this spirit in the three thousand sinners on Pentecost whose grievous guilt Peter had made them to feel. They were glad to find that forgiveness was possible and gladly hastened to acquire it. Paul realized that the things in the world which he once considered profitable were not at all, compared to gaining Christ (Phil. 3:7-8). Although he suffered all manner of persecution for the kingdom, he never once expressed regret for doing so. John reminds us, “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous” (1 John 5:3).

Those who have to be sort of “slipped up on” or “dragged” into the kingdom benefit neither themselves nor the kingdom. The “quickie” teaching process that led them to the water did little more than get them wet. Such have not repented. Their hearts are still in the world and merely ducking them in water does not change the heart or practice. Thus, many have been added to congregational rolls in recent years who were not taught the most fundamental truths about the church and the scheme of redemption. They never understood or accepted the difference between New Testament Christianity and denominationalism and were never converted from their errors. Now many of those people are Bible school teachers, and not a few of them have been appointed as elders and

deacons. This phenomenon explains some of the dire apostasy in our ranks.

The men in the parable did not have to be forced or begged to purchase their respective treasures. They did not hesitate for one moment. It was the only sensible and wise thing to do. They did not go home, wishing they had the treasures, but doing nothing to get them (as do some who admire Jesus from a distance, wishing they had His blessings but refusing to do what is necessary to get them). Neither did these men denigrate the value of the kingdom. These men did not wait for the price to go down, as some seem to do who think that, later in life, it will be easier to follow Jesus and serve in His kingdom.

Conclusion

When the pearl merchant found the object of his quest, all he said was “How much?” He was not surprised to learn that the price was great indeed! However, this pearl was the object of his life, and his life would have been empty and vain had he not bought it. What did it matter that he had to give all he owned to have it?

After the church was established and the Gospel began to be preached, when men came upon the Truth of the kingdom and asked and were told how they might partake of it, they responded in immediate obedience (Acts 2:37-41; 9:6-18; 22:16; 16:30-35). They realized the treasure that was before them and wisely invested in it immediately.

The kingdom of Christ and the salvation in it are the treasure worth all—the pearl of great price. If we do not give all we have for it now, the time will come—as sure as are God, His Son, and the Truth of Their Word—when we will be willing to. How much better to give up joyfully all and enjoy the blessings of the kingdom now, as well as forever!

Let us who are in the kingdom ever realize its incomparable worth and love it and serve in it with all of our being. Let us ever be alert for those who are searching for the priceless pearl, that we help them obtain it. Let us make the treasure of the kingdom visible and desirable even to those who are not looking for it, that they may discover it and want to make it their own.

Endnotes

1 All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

2 The simile is signaled by the use of **as** or **like**, indicating a similarity between that which is being spoken and something else. The metaphor, on the other hand, bypasses **as** or **like** and simply says one thing **is** another [e.g., “This is my body” (Matt. 26:26); “I am the door” (John 10:9)].

CHAPTER 16

The Parable Of The Mustard Seed

Jim Pharr

Introduction

THE LORD JESUS CHRIST could take the common, everyday expressions and illustrations of His time and infuse them with life. His purpose was to reveal to us the mysteries of the kingdom of God. In doing so, the great Master Teacher could turn the most ordinary observation of human existence into great lessons of Christianity. Such is the case of the Parable of the Mustard Seed.

In His day, there was a common expression used to show smallness. That expression was “small as a mustard seed.” This expression was much like our modern day expressions “big as a barn” or “quiet as a mouse.” When we use these expressions, we are not stating a scientific fact, because no one is truly as big as a barn, but we use these expressions in our conversations to illustrate graphically the point we are attempting to make.

The mustard seed is not the smallest of seeds. I have been told that the orchid seed is the smallest, but Jesus was not giving a gardening lesson. He was using a seed that started small but grew into a large tree or plant.

The Parable Announced

Another parable put he forth unto them, saying,
The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of

mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field (Matt. 13:31).

And He said, Whereunto shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or with what comparison shall we compare it? (Mark 4:30).

Then said he, Unto what is the kingdom of God like? and whereunto shall I resemble it? (Luke 13:18).

This parable was about the kingdom. Jesus wanted His hearers to understand the kingdom, so He spoke of it often in parable after parable. Every parable revealed a different truth about the kingdom. The kingdom of God was a priority in Jesus' life. Living in the kingdom should be our priority.

Prior to delivering this parable, Jesus had already given us the Parable of the Sower and the Parable of the Tares. The reason behind teaching these parables at this time is not clear. Jesus had been dealing with the Pharisees and their criticism. They had said He performed a miracle by the power of Satan (Matt. 12:24). Perhaps the Pharisees were thinking how absurd it was that this Jesus thought He could exalt Israel to world domination. He had no riches, no power, or honor. How could He establish a kingdom?

He may have chosen this parable when He did because of the discouraging nature of the first two kingdom parables. In the Parable of the Sower, only one soil of the four would truly produce a harvest. In the Parable of the Tares, Satan was doing his best to undermine the efforts of the sower. But the Parable of the Mustard Seed was encouragement in the strongest form; from something small would grow a great kingdom.

Which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof (Matt. 13:32).

It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown in the earth, is less than all the seeds that be in the earth: But when it is sown, it groweth up, and becometh greater than all herbs, and shooteth out great branches; so that the fowls of the air may lodge under the shadow of it (Mark 4:31-32).

It is like a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and cast into his garden; and it grew, and waxed a great tree; and the fowls of the air lodged in the branches of it (Luke 13:19).

A contrast is being emphasized. Jesus wants us to appreciate the smallness of the mustard seed. He then compares the seed's small beginning to the large growth which is produced.

In the days of Jesus the mustard seed was a symbol of smallness. The Rabbis spoke of "a spot or blemish as small as a mustard seed." Jesus said faith the size of a mustard seed would produce great results (Luke 17:6). Jesus purposely used this saying to make a point regarding the kingdom of God. The kingdom was being compared to something so small and insignificant that a breath could blow it out of a hand to never be found again. Jesus was painting a picture of small beginnings.

The kingdom of God, however, would not stay that way. For as the seed grows into something much larger in comparison to what it was when it began, so shall the kingdom of God. The mustard seed, in a sense, explodes with growth. What started so small that a bird could hold it in its mouth became a place for that same bird to rest.

The Parable Applied

By applying the mustard seed to the kingdom of God, Jesus is saying that, although its beginning may seem small and insignificant, it will grow and continue to grow until it is large and powerful. It starts as a small seed,

hardly noticed, but will eventually become a tree noticed by all. God's kingdom started small, almost invisible, but it transformed the earth.

If we look back to the first century, the most important thing in the world is Christianity, but, when we examine history, the thing that impresses us is the utter unconsciousness displayed by the world of Jesus and His movement. Hardly any one was interested!

In Jerusalem, near to a national holy day, a man who has stirred up some trouble among the lower class of people is arrested, tried quickly, and crucified on a cross. Hurriedly, He is taken down and placed in a grave. Fifty days later, in that same city, those men, who fled when He was arrested and crucified, stood up and proclaimed with power, fearlessly, logically, and rationally, relating that such had been God's plan. These simple men tied all the events of history—the death of that man and the unusual happenings of the present day—together, claiming that God had made the One they crucified both Lord and Christ. That sermon was concluded by calling upon men and women to accept and submit their lives to Jesus, the Anointed of God; to change their minds and be baptized; to have their wrongs forgiven; and to be united with the Holy Spirit of God (Acts 2:22-40).

By those simple men, who had denied the man Jesus fifty days before, three thousand people, who were convinced of the correctness of their message, were willing to step out on faith, and obey the commands gladly (Acts 2:41). From that beginning, until today, some two thousand years later, millions and millions have, in like fashion, obeyed. They have dedicated their lives and have been identified with Christ, His Father, the Holy Spirit and the people of God.

The analogy of the tree was something that was familiar to the people of Israel. Often in Scripture, a tree

represented a powerful nation (Ezek. 17:22; Dan. 4:10, 21). In the parable, the kingdom becomes so large that it can shelter birds. The respectable Adam Clarke testifies to having seen in Bible lands a mustard tree strong enough for a man to climb. The power of the parable, however, does not depend upon finding such a tree, only one suitable to lodge birds.

This mention of birds in the parable has been a source of many interpretations down through the years. Scofield taught that the birds symbolize pagan world powers. J. D. McFadyen, in his work **The Message of the Parables**, stated that the growth of the tree and the birds nesting there shows the gradual revelation of God's will to man and it still continues to this day. He needs to read Jude 3! Weirsbe claims the birds are Satan. Barclay tells us the birds represent all the different denominations in the world. He misses the point of the one seed! Some of our brethren hold the view that the birds nesting represent the refuge found in the church. However, all these ideas are pure speculation. The birds have no hidden meaning. Perhaps Jesus simply used them to help the reader envision the contrast between the small mustard seed and the growth that resulted in a haven for birds.

Regardless of how one may try to interpret the different aspects of the parable, Jesus' main reason for the parable is exceptionally clear. It was to teach that the kingdom of God might begin in a small way but it will end in greatness.

The potential for the kingdom's amazing growth lies in the Person Who reigns as its King. Those who will abide in Christ can be used by Him to produce the remarkable growth in the kingdom illustrated by this parable.

CHAPTER 17

The Parable Of The Wicked Husbandmen

Robert R. Taylor, Jr.

Introduction

I*T IS ALWAYS* A deep delight and high honor to appear on the **POWER** Lectures as I have done on all the previous ones. Genuine gratitude is expressed to B. J. Clarke, the elders and all the Southaven congregation for this treasured invitation. I regard this as one of our premiere lectureships and one consistently on the cutting edge of towering Truth.

The parable assigned for this study is not as familiar to us as are some of the others such as the ten virgins and the talents in Matthew 25; the great supper in Luke 14; the prodigal son in Luke 15; or the parables of the sower, the tares, the mustard seed, the leaven, the hidden treasure, the pearl of great price, and the fishing net in Matthew 13—a chapter filled with powerful parables. Yet the Holy Spirit had Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record this parable. In the aggregate it has much more coverage than some of the previously mentioned ones. The synoptic scribes devote some thirty-six verses to it and the Lord's application thus made (Matt. 21:33-45; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19). This evidences its intense import in the eyes of the Spirit of Truth who revealed only what He heard from Father and Son (John 16:13-15). This

sort of comprehensive coverage is richly deserving of our serious study and close contemplation.

Why Christ Taught In Parables

Jesus taught in parables:

1. To veil truth from enemies, scoffers and those fully apathetic to His Cause.
2. To unveil truth for sincere searchers and seekers of truth.
3. To elicit a condemnation from His enemies of their evil course even before they realized what they were conceding in answer.
4. To encourage a deeper, more fascinating and more profitable study of eternal truth.
5. To embellish and immortalize truth by the nobility of these simply told and yet very sublime stories.¹

Surely the third one of these five was on the front burner when Jesus gave this scorching story. In no sense of the term did He do a Jerusalem-marketable survey to see what the elite Jewish hierarchy wanted and then gear a parable that would be “user-friendly” or one that met “felt needs.” This parable, according to Matthew’s account, forms the middle parable of a trilogy—the two sons in Matthew 21:28-32, this one in Matthew 21:33-45, and that of the marriage feast for the king’s son in Matthew 22:1-14. Change Agents, intent on pleasing the palates of their superficial, uncommitted auditors, would never be interested in presenting a three-part study of this trilogy of plain, pungent, potent, and penetrating parables. Bill Hybels and his Willow Creek philosophy of modern church growth would not be apt to have these parables on the agenda of needed sermons at all!! Neither would any of our spineless brethren who mimic him and copy his megachurch movement. But Jesus did, and He had

Matthew record all three, with Mark and Luke recording the one about the wicked husbandman; these two did not include the parables of the two sons and the wedding feast for the king's son.

Matthew's Account Of The Parable

Hear another parable: There was a certain householder which planted a vineyard, and hedged it round about, and digged a winepress in it, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country. And when the time of the fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the husbandmen, that they might receive the fruit of it. And the husbandmen took his servants, and beat one, and killed another, and stoned another. Again, he sent other servants more than the first: and they did unto them likewise. But last of all he sent unto them his son, saying, They will reverence my son. But when the husbandmen saw the son, they said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him and let us seize on his inheritance. And they caught him, and cast him out of the vineyard, and slew him. When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen? They say unto him, He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons. Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes? Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof. And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder. And when the chief priests and Pharisees had heard his parables, they perceived that he spake of them (21:33-45).

Verses 41 and 45 fully attest the third point made in the **why** of His parabolic preaching. Skillfully, He led them to condemn themselves before they scarcely realized what they were saying. Obviously, they were no match for the Master Communicator, the Brilliant Debater.

Occasion And Background Of The Parable

This parable was given during the Final Week. His death and burial will climax the week on that Friday. Early the next week on the first day, as per Mark 16:9, Jesus will triumph over the tomb by being raised from the dead—never to die again (cf. Heb. 7:25; Rev. 1:18).

Jesus gave this parable on Tuesday of that Final Week. It was perhaps the busiest day of our Lord's ministry up to that point. More material is given relative to that day than any other recorded day of His sojourn on this mundane sphere. Opposition to Him was intensifying, especially among the Jewish hierarchy. They had detested His triumphant entrance into the city on that Sunday and the thunderous reception He received from the masses.

Early in Matthew 21, He had cleansed the temple for a second time.

He had done this earlier in His ministry as per John 2:13-17. John is the lone scribe to record the first cleansing. Jewish leaders demanded His authority for doing so the first time. His answer to them was unique and courageous (2:19-22). Subsequent to the second cleansing, Jewish leaders demanded His authority for so doing again (Matt. 21:23). He agreed to answer them provided they would answer a very vital question He posed: "The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men?" (21:25). They were caught in the trap He skillfully set for their scheming treachery. If they answered that its origin was heavenly, they knew He would query them as to why they refused to accept John's testimony about Jesus being the

Messiah, the very Son of God. If they answered that it was human in origin, they feared the wrath of zealous Jews who deemed John to be God's prophet. Like spineless cowards they answered, "We cannot tell" (21:27). This was a colossal lie! They knew they would be in trouble with either of these answers. He said, "Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things" (21:27).

Promptly, He gave the parable of the two sons. Neither Mark nor Luke gives this parable. This parable has a vineyard setting just as did the one about the wicked husbandman. The vineyard owner had two sons. Each is commanded to go work in their father's vineyard. Note that He did not send them into another man's vineyard. The Lord has but one vineyard and our work is to be done **in** it—not in Protestant, Catholic, cultic, occultic, or World Religion vineyards. One refused but later repented and went; the other complied quickly with a verbal affirmation but refused to go. Jesus asked which complied obediently. They answered that the first son did, and in this they were correct.

Then He made His own powerful application. Publicans and harlots were receptive toward the coming kingdom that John and Jesus both preached as being near at hand (Matt. 3:2; 4:17). These stubborn Jewish leaders refused to believe John, but the more receptive publicans and harlots were moved marvelously to do John's bidding.

This is the immediate background of the parable of the wicked husbandmen and there is a definite parabolic kinship between these two parables coming back-to-back as in Matthew's account. Subsequent to the one about the wicked husbandmen, He will present the third of Matthew's trilogy of powerful, plain, and penetrating parables—the parable of the marriage feast made for the king's son.

In each of these three parables, there is a portrait of rebellious Jews. The son who said he would go and refused to do so represented stubborn Israelities who were adamant against John, Jesus, and all entreaties made for them to believe in Christ, repent, and be baptized with John's baptism for the remission of sins, thus being ready for the Messianic kingdom when it would be established in precision and perfection in Acts 2. The wicked husbandmen represent the worst element of obstinate Jews who dishonored the vineyard owner, mistreated all his sent servants, and finally conspired to kill the owner's own son. The parable of the wedding feast showed the utter contempt they had for the bounties lavishly prepared for them. The depths of their disdain is viewed in Matthew 22:5: "But they made light of it, and went their ways, one to his farm, another to his merchandise." Mistreatment of the king's servants also occurred as in the parable of the wicked husbandmen. The wrath of the aroused king is seen in how he dealt with these daring enemies and with the man who invaded the wedding feast minus the wearing of a wedding garment (22:11-14).

These parables would not likely be used by any "user-friendly" church out to make every attendant feel good and great about himself. They long ago gave up the role of a preacher as being obligated "to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable." They would have no place in their talks for any of Matthew 23 either!

The Primary Meaning Of The Parable

Vineyards were as common in first century Palestine as wheat fields are in Kansas, corn fields in Illinois, or cotton fields in the South and Southwest. A parable about a vineyard would be readily perceived by His first century auditors.

Jesus called it a parable. He taught a lesson about some physical object and, by its side, a lesson with spiritual ramifications and projections was laid with consummate skill.

The householder represents God Who planted the vineyard. Isaiah 5 speaks of the Lord's planted vineyard. Isaiah 5:2 sounds much like the drapery the Lord used in Matthew 21; Mark 12; and Luke 20. There is the planting of the choice vine; there is the fence or hedge built around it. There are the tower and the winepress. Patience is practiced, giving the vineyard sufficiency of time to be productive in fruit bearing. Isaiah presents the disappointment to the Lord in His own query: "What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it?" (Isa. 5:4). Instead of a rich harvest of wholesome grapes, the vineyard brought forth wild grapes.

The vineyard represents God's covenant people under the Mosaic Dispensation. Geographically, they were hedged in by the sea to their west and the barren desert to their east. They had neighbors to the north, the northeast, the south, the southeast and the southwest. Yet they were far enough removed from any of them as to be a fenced-in or hedged-in population.

The digging of the winepress was in happy anticipation of an abundant harvest and the joyful pressing of the juice out of the wholesome grapes. Incidentally, this shows that the freshly pressed juice from the grapes was called wine and yet was not fermented at this point for a surety. Surface students assume from the top of their heads that **every** Biblical reference to wine is of the intoxicative variety. **Not so!**

Towers were built in vineyards for lodging, for protection of the workers, and for their successful stewardship of the valuable vineyards.

The owner went into a far country. This is part of the parabolic drapery. Deity did not forsake the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This exhibits God's patience and spirit of longsuffering in allowing His people to develop spiritually and morally. He had every right to expect Israel and its leaders to become a fruit-bearing nation of spiritual stalwarts. But disappointment replaced what should have been Deity's delight.

Harvest time drew near. He sent specially selected servants that they might receive the expected and anticipated fruits belonging to him. The servants in the parable were Old Testament prophets such as Samuel, Nathan, Micaiah, Elijah, Elisha, and the sixteen writing prophets from Isaiah to Malachi.

The husbandmen, representing the rebels among God's people, maligned, mistreated and maliciously dealt with God's servants—the prophets. God's faithful prophets from Moses to Malachi suffered greatly at the merciless hands of these God haters. They were beaten, stoned, and killed in a vicious variety of wicked ways. Moses was rejected. Samuel was replaced by a king at the behest of the dissatisfied people. Elijah lived under Jezebel's threat much of his prophetic life. Isaiah may have been sawn asunder by wicked Manasseh (cf. Heb. 11:37). Jeremiah was mocked, rejected, and imprisoned. Their whole history was a rejection of God, God's law, and God's prophets. Stephen, in Acts 7, traces out their long history of wholesale rejection of the Divine and favoring the devilish and diabolical.

As a last resort, He sent His own Son. This refers to the sending of God's only begotten Son (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9). He averred, "They will reverence my son" (Matt. 21:37). John would later write, "He came unto his own, and his own received him not" (John 1:11). Isaiah 53 portrayed with poignancy the rejection the Messiah would receive when He came.

The hatred of the husbandmen knew no bounds. No welcome mat was extended to the Son Who came. Instead, they conspired to put the apparent heir to death. Then they would seize the inheritance, making it their own. Later that very same week the Jewish hierarchy would maneuver the Jewish populace and manipulate the Roman government in Palestine into the execution of the Lord of Glory. Calvary was the only thing that would satisfy their insatiable thirst for His blood. During His ministry He frequently alluded to what the Jewish leaders and the Roman authorities would do to Him. Calvary was in the planning and purposing of Deity's scheme of human redemption. Jewish rejection of Him caught neither the Father nor the Son off guard.

Self-Condensation On The Part Of His Enemies

In the giving of the parable, Jesus knew perfectly that the time was right to query His enemies by asking, "When the lord of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen?" (Matt. 21:40). They answered with self-condemnation, punctuating every syllable: "He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their season" (21:41). They pronounced with correctness their own coming doom. Before Governor Pilate they clamored for His crucifixion saying they had **no king but Caesar**. In less than four decades, Caesar would send Titus to crush them, and grievous would be the destruction of their once blessed and beautiful city and temple on Mount Moriah.

National Israel would be no more God's people. Spiritual Israel would be God's people. Premillennialists reject both of these propositions. Their materialistic hopes are penned on National Israel. They know next to nothing

about Spiritual Israel or the true church of Jesus Christ. No part of the Bible is safe in their unholy hands of militant millennialism. They feel constrained to rewrite the whole Bible from Genesis 12 to Revelation 20. Their system is pernicious and poisonous from the word go!

The Lord's Application

With His marvelous mind saturated thoroughly and perfectly with Old Testament Scripture, Jesus recalled Psalm 118:22-23. Matthew has Him to say:

Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes? Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof. And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder (Matt. 21:42-44).

The conduct of the wicked husbandmen was of no surprise to either the Father or the Son. In reality, it was prophesied in this Old Testament passage. Christ was the rejected stone. The building imagery is of vivid force; it is graphically stated by this great Parabolic Preacher. The builders are active. The building material is before them. One stone is set aside as being totally useless in their constructive efforts. It is the outcast. Yet, it was Divinely designed to head the corner or to become the chief corner stone. A corner stone holds together two walls and gives strength to both. Here we have a blending of prophecy and fulfillment, of eternity and time, of the present and the future, of Divinity and humanity, of faith and works, of mercy and justice, and of Jew and Gentile.² In his marvelous material on Luke

20, Joe Gilmore also added beauty and service to the stately significance of this corner stone and these two walls.³

Jesus Christ: The Rock Of Ages

Many are the Old Testament and New Testament references to the Christ in rock-like profile. In lyrical force He is truly “the Rock of Ages.”

1. He is the **foundational** stone. Isaiah so stated in 28:16: “Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone.” In Matthew 16:16, Peter confessed with courage and conviction His Messiahship and His Sonship to God. Peter was **petros** or a small pebble. Peter’s confession of Christ’s Deity was **petra**—a great ledge of rock or a boulder. Upon it—not Peter or the pebble—Christ proposed the building of His church (Matt. 16:18).

2. He is the **tried** stone. There would be nothing wanting or insufficient about Him as a stone.

3. He is the **precious** stone (Isa. 28:16). Isaiah tied precious and corner stone together. Peter referred to Him as that precious stone (1 Pet. 2:4, 6).

4. He is a **sure** stone or a **sure** foundation (Isa. 28:16). In no sense of the term would He be a sandy foundation. He spoke of the folly of building on sand in Matthew 7:26-27.

5. He is the **living** stone. He is the source of all life—physical and spiritual. His own words, in a great “I Am” declaration, portray Him as the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6). Minus Him there is **no** going, **no** knowing, and **no** living.

6. To the disobedient He is the **stone** of stumbling, and a **rock** of offense (1 Pet. 2:8). They stumble at His Deity and Word; they count His Gospel as being deeply and embarrassingly offensive. They desire **no** part of Him or His Gospel.

7. He is the **destructive** stone. Rejecters of Him will be broken or ground to powder (Matt. 21:44). Both expressions add up to total destruction. Those who erase all wrath from Father and Son would have a very, **very** difficult time in exegeting this verse. Probably most of them do not even know of its literary existence!

8. He is the **rock** of refuge, as we see stressed in Hebrews 6:18. In a world filled with uncertainty and unsurety, He is truly “the Rock of Ages.”

9. He is the **stone** of salvation. There is no other name under heaven in Whom we can be saved other than that of Christ. Later, Peter will say this to the very wicked husbandmen Jesus had in mind when He gave this parable (Acts 4:12).

The Lord’s Enemies Made Their Own Application Of This Parable

Matthew states, “And when the chief priests and Pharisees had heard his parables, they perceived that he spake of them.” (Matt. 21:45). Note the usage of the plural here. Surely the parable of the two sons and that of the wicked husbandmen are included in this plural usage. Matthew 21 closes with this interesting insight: “But when they sought to lay hands on him, they feared the multitude, because they took him for a prophet” (Matt. 21:46).

They were perceptive enough to see their own profile in the parables of the two sons and that of the wicked husbandmen. Yet they were not perceptive enough to see their great need of forsaking falsehood, abandoning their adamant ways of wickedness, and seeking the salvation the Great Parable Preacher graciously extended to them and all others.

That same Tuesday they will make a devilish and diabolical covenant with traitorous Iscariot to betray this hated enemy, the Christ, into their hands of hatred and

hostility. Their hatred of Him will intensify the next three days, and, within seventy-two hours, they will witness Him on the rugged tree of Calvary or Golgotha. They were too far down the river of no return to exhibit any interest at all in Gospel obedience. The possibility of a return was not an option to them at all!

Jesus Made His Own Application

“The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof” (Matt. 21:43). National Israel was to be no more, as touching who God’s true people are. What a staggering blow to their nationalistic spirits! They had Abrahamic blood coursing their physical veins but did not have Abrahamic faith coursing their spiritual arteries. Jesus expounded on this with force in the latter part of John 8. Spiritual Israel would be the new nation through whom God’s plan would be worked out to resplendent perfection.

The whole of the New Testament so attests. This is the kingdom the Hebrew prophets of the Old Testament saw and of which they prophesied. This is the kingdom John preached and for which Jesus prepared so thoroughly during His personal ministry. This is the church Jesus proposed to build in Matthew 16:18 and that He successfully constructed in Acts 2—the great hub chapter of the whole Bible. This is the church to which all the saved have been added since Acts 2 (see especially verse 47). This is the glorious church that was enhanced and exalted in Acts, the epistles, and the beautiful book of Revelation. Eight men, all inspired of God, wrote the New Testament—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, Peter, James, and Jude. Not the first one ever trashed, belittled, degraded, or downgraded the Lord’s church, as Change Agents do in wholesale fashion today.

This is the church the gallant pioneers restored out of corrupt Catholicism and pernicious Protestantism by preaching the old Jerusalem Gospel. They knew if they preached what was preached in the New Testament and if men would hear, believe, and obey what they heard, believed, and obeyed in New Testament times, that men in modern times would become exactly what they became in Bible times. This is the heart of the Restoration plea that has become “old hat” to a new breed of preachers out to restructure the blessed bride of King Jesus.

This is the church to which we have been added and have belonged across the years. Fifty-six years ago, August 10, 1944, I obeyed the gospel on a Friday night during a gospel meeting at Locust Grove near Bradford, Tennessee. For more than fifty years, I have preached for this great and glorious church and urged thousands in person and by pen to belong to the same. This is still my plea in season and out of season as I preach the Word of God (2 Tim. 4:2). I have no desire to change anything about the Divine blueprint producing and maintaining the church of Christ in our day. I know I speak the sentiments of those hearing this lesson orally, or those who later will read this great and good volume of the 2000 **POWER** Lectureship.

Making Some Present Day Applications Of Lessons Learned

1. Making assaults on Hebrew prophets of the Old Testament or the apostles of the New Testament are, in reality, assaults made toward God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, and the entire scheme of human redemption.

2. A failure to reverence the Son is a failure to reverence the Father Who sent Him.

3. National Israel thought they could steal God's vineyard from Him. This parable proves how utterly mistaken they were.

4. Militant millennialism makes the same atrocious mistake today, and yet this movement has millions bowing at its materialistic shrine.

5. Those who produce fruit for God today are His true people—not those supportive of the National Israel mania.

6. The wrath of God is on the front burner in the parable of the wicked husbandmen.

7. Reject Christ, as the masses do in our day, and redemption is out of reach for a surety.

8. Regardless of what rebellious men do, God's plan is intact and is not going to be thwarted in the least.

9. God's patience is not without limits. This is clearly perceived in the parable we have just studied.

10. Jesus Christ will have the final word as touching those who have rejected Him in this life. Matthew 25:34-46 contain some of those final words that will be enunciated on that Day of days.

Conclusion

This parable shows conclusively that God and Christ cannot be mocked with impunity—i.e., with no accompanying punishment. The Glorious Godhead will be victorious—not wicked men such as we see among these hateful and hostile husbandmen.

Endnotes

1 Robert R. Taylor, Jr., *The Parables Of Our Saviour*, ed. Fred Davis, Garfield Heights Lectureship (Lebanon, TN: Sain Publications, 1983), p. 2.

2 Wayne Jackson, *The Parables In Profile* (Stockton, CA: Wayne Jackson, 1978), pp. 35-36.

3 Joe Gilmore, *Luke*, ed. Bill Cline (Austin: Firm Foundation, 1988), p. 475.

CHAPTER 18

The Parable Of The Fig Tree

Ted J. Clarke

Introduction

ONCE AGAIN I COUNT it a distinct privilege to be speaking on the **POWER** Lectures. This Southaven congregation, with its visionary elders, dedicated deacons, faithful evangelists, and many exemplary members, makes it one of the finest in the Lord's church. This lectureship is only one manifestation of its outreaches to teach the truth to a world lost in sin. I continue to thank God for the talents and energy of B. J., as he spreads his influence in many ways to many parts of the country and world. While I am continually asked if I am proud of him and his work, I never tire of saying, "Of course I am!"

My assignment is to discuss the rather brief text, and seemingly obvious meaning, of the parable of the fig tree from Jesus' Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24:32-33 and the parallels. Parallel accounts of the entire Olivet Discourse are found in Matthew 24; Mark 13; and Luke 21. (Hereafter, I will list the major text from Matthew or one of the other Synoptic gospels of Mark or Luke, followed by the symbol //, which signifies parallel texts to the passage cited.) J. W. McGarvey assigns (a) to Matthew, (b) to Mark, and (c) to Luke and combines the three accounts as follows:

(c) And he spake to them a parable: (a) Now from the fig tree learn her parable: when her branch is now become tender, and putteth forth its leaves, ye know that summer is nigh; (c) Behold the fig tree, and all trees: when they now shoot forth, ye see it and know of yourselves that the summer is now nigh. Even so ye also, when ye see (a) all (c) these things coming to pass, know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh. (a) know ye that he is nigh, even at the doors.¹

Matthew and Mark are nearly identical accounts so there is no separate (b) section.

The Parable

Christ frequently used parables involving agricultural settings (cf. Matt. 13:1-43; et al.). These were common sense comparisons of earthly things intended to impart spiritual lessons pertaining to the kingdom of God. Some had to do with the coming (establishment) of God's kingdom on earth in the form of the church (Matt. 13:1-43; 16:13-19; et al.). Others had to do with the coming of the kingdom in judgment at the end of time, ushering in the eternal phase of God's kingdom (Matt. 25:1-46; 2 Pet. 1:10-11; et al.). In this instance Jesus used the disciples' knowledge of the signs of the coming of the yearly seasons to make His point. The Lord reminded them that, when they saw the fig tree put forth its leaves, "ye know that summer is near [nigh]" (Matt. 24:32 //, author's comments bracketed throughout, TC). Luke says that the application holds true for "all the trees," signifying that the appearance of leaves on all trees points to the soon coming of warmer weather:

The fig tree, **Ficus Carica**, L., is cultivated everywhere in the Holy Land, and also grows spontaneously in many places. It is a tree of moderate size, seldom attaining a height of 15 ft., but its spreading branches often cover a circle

with a diameter of 25 to 30 ft. Fig trees are habitually planted near houses, and the people sit in their shade, and that of the vines which grow over the trellises. This familiar sight did not fail to be noticed in the OT and Apoc[rypha] as an emblem of peace and prosperity (1 K[ings] 4:25; Mic. 4:4; Zec[h] 3:10; 1 Mac[cabees] 14:12). There are numerous varieties of figs cultivated, some of which bear a tart, blackish fruit, others a sweet greenish or whitish one. The branches are straggling and naked in winter, but when the rains are nearly or quite over, small green knobs appear at the end of the twigs. They are the young fruits...“green figs” (Ca[nticles] 2:13). The leaf-bud now expands, and the new pale green leaves soon more or less overshadow the little figs. This is a familiar sign of early summer (Mt. 24:32). Hence a fig tree with leaves must already have young fruits, or it will be barren for the season. The first figs ripen late in May or early in June.²

The ability of people to perceive signs of events about to happen from nature, but not being perceptive enough to “read” the signs of spiritual happenings, was a problem addressed by the Lord more than once. He rebuked the Pharisees and Sadducees for failure to “discern the [obvious] signs of the times” regarding His ministry, while they could clearly observe and foresee the fair and foul weather signals in the sky (Matt. 16:1-3). Jesus made a similar observation to “the people” in general in Luke 12:54-56, saying, “Ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky and of the earth; but how is it ye cannot discern this time?”

The “this time” teaching and miracles of Christ were signs more than adequate to prove that His person and ministry were of God (cf. Gal. 4:4; Matt. 12:10-42). Passages such as Exodus 4:1-31 and Mark 16:15-20 show that God equipped His servants with proof of their claims of being His spokesmen. There was no need for the Jews to ask

Jesus for additional signs, for He showed His authority clearly without having to be asked (cf. John 20:30-31). Asking God for miraculous signs was not always wrong (cf. Judg. 6:36-40), but it was (is) wrong to reject signs God has already given and to treat them as inadequate (cf. Exod. 7:8-13; Matt. 12:10-14).

Those who knew that, when the leaves appeared on the fig trees, summer was near should not have any difficulty discerning the signs Christ gave in Matthew 24 // and taking appropriate action when needed.

The Context Of The Parable

As noted, the teaching of Christ in Matthew 24 // is commonly called the “Olivet Discourse” because Jesus spoke these things to His disciples as He “sat on the mount of Olives” near Jerusalem (Matt. 24:3 //). Matthew records that, after Christ had given the Pharisees the scathing rebuke in 23:1-33, He left the temple area and uttered His lament over Jerusalem, including His remark that Jerusalem’s “house [temple] is left unto you desolate,” and that “Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord” (23:34-39). Mark’s and Luke’s accounts pick up the Olivet Discourse after the story of the poor widow casting her two mites into the temple treasury (Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4).

Likely in reaction to the comment of the Lord about the “house being left desolate,” as they left the temple compound, the disciples sought to impress Christ with the beauty and grandeur of the buildings of the temple (Matt. 24:1 //). John 2:20 speaks of the time (forty-six years) and attention given to the improvements recently made on the second temple, which had been rebuilt after the return from Babylonian captivity (finished ca. 516 B.C.):

Herod's [the Great] work began in 20/19 B. C., and, except for matters of detail and added adornment, was completed within a decade. These additional matters, however, occupied the Jews for almost all the years between c. 10 B.C. and the outbreak of the revolt on A.D. 66, in part by design: such labor provided jobs for many who would otherwise have been unemployed....Herod was a man of great ambitions, and his reconstruction of the Temple reflected that aggrandizing character. He essentially doubled the foundation, or Temple Mount, that had existed in Solomon's day.³

No doubt Jewish pride abounded in such magnificent structures, even among Christ's disciples, who yet failed to understand what was going to happen. Imagine their shock when Jesus said, "Seest all these great buildings? There shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down" (Mark 13:2 //).

Matthew's account gives the fullest response of the disciples in the questions they asked about this prophecy of destruction: "Tell us, when shall these things be? And what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?" (Matt. 24:3). Mark 13:4 records the second question as: "what shall be the sign when all these things shall be fulfilled?"; Luke has "when these things shall come to pass" (21:7).

The Lord's response, leading up to the parable of the fig tree, was to give a number of signs characteristic of the time period leading to the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem, including some specific signs when the desolation was near so that the disciples could flee the destruction and save their own lives (Matt. 24:4-34 //). The parable of the fig tree was a warning to be alert to discern the signs foretelling the nearness of the doom of Jerusalem, just as one could see the leaves budding on the fig trees

and know that summer was near. Matthew 24:34 narrowed down the time frame of these signs to the lifetime of the generation to whom Jesus spoke, saying, "Verily I say unto you, **this generation** shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled" (emp. in Biblical quotes mine throughout, TC).

From the second question the disciples asked, "What shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?," it appears that they believed that such a catastrophic event as the total destruction of the temple and its many buildings would necessitate the end of the world with Christ's coming. Jesus responded to this part of their questions in Matthew 24:35-51 //, but said that there would not be any signs to signal the nearness of His second coming, which would usher in the final judgment and dispensing of rewards and punishments. Matthew 25:1-46 is a continuation of the discussion of the disciples' second question, which takes in Matthew 24:35 through the end of 25:46. In fact, of the time of this final event Jesus stated, "But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father" (Mark 13:32). Matthew 24:36 says no one knows "But my Father only."

Accordingly, the parable of the fig tree applies to "all these things," the signs given in Matthew 24:4-34 // to the people of the generation to whom Jesus spoke these words. Neither the signs nor the parable of the fig tree pertains to knowing the nearness of Christ's second coming and the end of the world.

The Application

From our study thus far, we have determined that the earthly illustration was the ability to know summer is near by the budding of the fig tree. The spiritual application is that God's coming judgment upon Jerusalem could also be discerned by the signs that Jesus gave to the generation

to whom He spoke. Seeing the signs begin to come to pass allowed them to know that the fall of the city was near.

Nearly all Bible students agree with this basic application as to the meaning of this parable to some degree. However, many deny that Matthew 24 // can be divided, with verses 4-34 applying to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and verses 35-51 applying to Christ's second coming at a yet future date. Two very different systems of Biblical interpretation oppose the division of the Olivet Discourse we have suggested. (There are some, who do not divide Matthew 24 as we have done, who do not fall victim to the errors of these two systems we will review. We do not mean to imply that these people pervert the Word of God in the ways we will critique below.) The two systems we will discuss are Premillennialism and Realized/Covenant eschatology. Although it would take a good-sized book to discuss either of these two systems, we will limit ourselves to attempt to show how a proper understanding of the parable of the fig tree in its contextual setting in Matthew 24 // refutes both of these erroneous systems of dealing with Biblical prophecy. We will make some necessary definitions for each system, document how each misuses the parable of the fig tree, and refute some of the major arguments used by each group.

Premillennialism

A millennium is a period of one thousand years. The year 2000 is the final year of the second millennium following the birth of Christ (although errors in the calendar calculations regarding Christ's birth, if corrected, would put us up to 2003-2004). A popular idea of Biblical prophecy is that Christ is going to return for a thousand-year earthly reign with His saints. Revelation 20:4 does speak of some who "lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years," but the verses' real meaning does not fit

the idea of Christ reigning on earth for 1000 years on a literal throne in Jerusalem. However, we do not have the time to deal with an extended refutation of that particular interpretation.⁴

Pre-millennialism believes that Christ's second coming **precedes** this thousand-year reign. **Post-millennialism** holds that Christ's second coming is **after** a thousand-year period of prosperity and peace on earth. **A-millennialism** says that there is **no** literal thousand-year period of Christ's reigning either before or after Christ's second coming, but that the thousand years is a figurative period of time between the Pentecost after Christ's resurrection and His second coming, during which Christ reigns on His throne in heaven (Acts 2:29-36). It is also the time Christians on earth enjoy the spiritual blessings in His church/kingdom (Acts 2:47; Eph. 1:3-7, 21-23; 5:23; Col. 1:12-18). When Christ comes again, Christians will not reign with Him on earth but will be raised to meet Him in the air and be with Him forever (1 Thess. 4:13-18). Christ will then deliver up the kingdom to God the Father for eternity (1 Cor. 15:24-28). The amillennial position, I believe, represents the correct concept of Christ's second coming and is in harmony with the last part of the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24:35-51 //).

Because Premillennialism (hereafter abbreviated as PM) is so prominent in the denominational world, we will consider it over a discussion of postmillennialism. The following summary of PM doctrines is not complete, but probably sufficient for our discussion:

Premillennialists generally believe that the return of Christ will be preceded by certain signs such as the preaching of the gospel to all nations, a great apostasy, wars, famines, earthquakes, the appearance of the Antichrist and a great tribulation. His return [to earth] will be followed by a period of peace and righteousness before

the end of the world. Christ will reign as King in person or through a select group of followers. This reign, rather than being established by the conversion of individual souls over a long period of time, will come about suddenly and by overwhelming power. The Jews will be converted and will become very important during this time. Nature will also share in the millennial blessings by being abundantly productive. Even ferocious beasts will be tamed. Evil is held in check during this age by Christ who rules with “a rod of iron.” However, at the end of the millennium there is a rebellion of wicked men which almost overwhelms the saints. Some premillennialists have taught that during this golden age dead believers will be resurrected with their glorified bodies to mingle freely with the rest of the inhabitants of the earth. After the millennium the non-Christian dead are raised and the eternal states of heaven and hell are established.⁵

You will note from the summary above that most of the “signs” mentioned are the same as those found in Matthew 24:4-34 //. PM bypasses the obvious application of those signs to the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and attempts to extend them beyond that “generation” to whom they applied, even though Jesus said no signs were given regarding His second coming.

Also, you will note that many of the elements of doctrine given in the quote are possible only if one adheres to a rigidly consistent literal interpretation of Scripture, even when a figurative or spiritual application is demanded. The Bible abounds in figurative language. It is found in the communications of every ethnic group of people who communicate even in the most primitive manner. However, completely literal interpretation is an absolute necessity in PM if it is to attempt to prove its most cherished doctrines.

“Dispensational” PM is the most popular brand of PM practiced today. This is the view of the Biblical

interpretation of prophecy promoted in the C. I. Scofield reference Bibles, and by John Darby, and William Blackstone. We have not the space to describe it in detail, but it embraces the basic PM positions given above, holding that we are now in the sixth dispensation of “Man Under Grace,” awaiting the second coming and the dispensation of “Man Under The Personal Reign Of Christ.”⁶ The following quote tells of the hermeneutical approach Dispensationalists take toward Bible prophecy (Hermeneutics is simply “a systematic method of Bible study,” even though the type of method used may be wrong, as the PM method is in error.):

[Dispensational Premillennialism] is born out of a system of hermeneutics which is usually called literal interpretation. Therefore, the second aspect of the **sine qua non*** of dispensationalism is the matter of plain hermeneutics. The word **literal** is perhaps not so good as either the word **normal** or **plain**, but in any case it is interpretation that does not spiritualize or allegorize as nondispensational interpretation does. The spiritualizing may be practiced to a lesser or greater degree, but its presence in a system of interpretation is indicative of a nondispensational approach. Consistently literal or plain interpretation is indicative of a dispensational approach to the interpretation of the Scriptures. And it is this very consistency—the strength of dispensational interpretation—that irks the nondispensationalist and becomes the object of his ridicule.⁷ * [**sine qua non** means “an essential element of”]

Ryrie, like all Dispensationalists, gives lip service to a purported belief in figures of speech, symbolic language, and spiritual truths, but he shows the absurdity of the PM approach he holds by contending that Ezekiel 39 tells of a yet future war of colossal proportions that will be fought using literal ancient swords, bows and arrows,

spears, and shields.⁸ Dispensational PM, to be consistent with its literal approach to all prophecy, would also have to hold that the great red dragon (Rev. 12:3-4) literally had a tail large enough to gather one-third of the literal stars in the literal heaven and literally throw them down to the literal earth! The earth on which we live is much smaller than even the smallest star, let alone one-third of the stars in heaven. Mr. Ryrie does not explain how earth could literally survive such a literal event, let alone the other impossible, but supposedly literal, problems such an interpretation demands.

PM do not believe that many of the signs of Matthew 24:4-34 // pertain to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Instead, they see these signs as precursors of Christ's second coming and many believe that we can tell when Jesus is coming again, in spite of what He said in Matthew 24:35-36. In fact, Hal Lindsey, one of the most prolific writers among PM, says that the parable of the fig tree is involved in predicting the soon coming of Christ. He designates one section in one of his books as the "Perfect Parable."⁹ Commenting on Matthew 24, he says:

When the signs just given begin to multiply and increase in scope it's similar to the certainty of leaves coming on the fig tree. But the most important sign in Matthew has to be the restoration of the Jews to the land in the rebirth of Israel. Even the figure of speech "fig tree" has been a historic symbol of national Israel. When the Jewish people, after nearly 2000 years of exile, under relentless persecution, became a nation again on 14 May 1948, the "fig tree" put forth its first leaves....Jesus said that this would indicate that He was "at the door," ready to return. Then He said, "Truly I say to you, **this generation** will not pass away until all these things take place" (Matthew 24:34 NASB). ...What generation? Obviously, in context, the generation that would see the signs—chief

among them the rebirth of Israel. A generation in the Bible is something like forty years. If this is a correct deduction, then within forty years or so of 1948, all these things could take place. Many scholars who have studied Bible prophecy all their lives believe that this is so.¹⁰

Fifty-two years have passed since 1948, and we are twelve years past Lindsey's projected 1988 date for the Lord's return. I recently heard Lindsey on a television program on Trinity Broadcasting Network state, "As long as there is one person alive on earth who was born in 1948, we are still in 'this generation' Jesus spoke about in Matthew 24:34." Predictors of the Lord's second coming have become very adept at hedging on their previous prophetic utterances, but the Bible says, if a self-proclaimed prophet makes a claim and it does not come to pass, "that is the thing which the Lord hath **not** spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him" (Deut. 18:21-22; cf. Jer. 23:16-32).

We previously noted that Jesus had said that "all these things [will] be fulfilled" before "this generation" to whom He spoke would pass from history (Matt. 24:34 //). Lindsey correctly identified "this generation" in Matthew 23:36 as "the generation which crucified [Jesus],"¹¹ but he contends that "this generation" from 24:34 is the generation alive since 1948. However, the word "this" in both verses is from the Greek **houtos** and is a demonstrative pronoun used as an adjective, "referring to someth[ing] comparatively near at hand, just as [**ekeinos**, "that"] refers to someth[ing] comparatively further away."¹² If Christ had been referring to a generation far removed from His time, He would have used "that generation" to signify that it was different from the one to whom He spoke. Also, in the parable of the fig tree, Jesus said, "**ye** know" and "when **ye** shall see all these things," referring to the

then-present generation. He did not use “they” referring to a future generation. Since Matthew 24:34 refers to the generation alive when Christ spoke these words, “all these things” came to pass before that generation died.

Others in PM try to make the word Jesus used for “generation” (Greek, **genea**) refer to the Jews as a race, or to a class of people like the unbelievers who rejected Christ.¹³ Another recent commentary says on Luke 21:32:

In the Third Gospel, “this generation” (and related phrases) has regularly signified a category of people who are resistant to the purpose of God. Verse 32, then, long a centerpiece in *eschatological debate, actually says less about the eschatological timetable and more to say about the motif of conflict related to the presence and expected culmination of the kingdom of God. “This generation” refers in Luke’s narrative not to a set number of decades or to people living at such-and-such a time, but to people who stubbornly turn their backs on the divine purpose.¹⁴ * [eschatology is simply the Bible teaching about end time things that will occur at Christ’s second coming]

These efforts amount to nothing more than an evasion of the contextual setting of the phrase “this generation” in Matthew 23 and 24 //. PM commentators cannot allow the natural meaning of that phrase to be the generation alive when Christ spoke, because they believe the signs of Matthew 24:4-34 // refer to Christ’s second coming. Since Jesus did not come and usher in the end of the world and final judgment during the life of those to whom He personally spoke, “this generation” must mean something else or Christ was wrong in what He said.

However, it is not necessary to draw such conclusions, for Jesus did make a clear distinction and division between the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, which the generation alive at that time would see along with the

signs of Matthew 24:4-34 //, and His coming and the end of the world (vv. 35-51), which was not tied to the time of that same generation. Christ's coming in judgment at the destruction of Jerusalem can be said to be a "type" of the final judgment at the end of the world, with many similarities, as we will show, but it obviously was not His second coming and the end of the world—more on this later.

Other commentators recognize the futile efforts to make "this generation" carry a meaning foreign to the context of what Christ was teaching. The following remarks on Luke 21:32 will stand:

Despite the attempts to apply [**he genea aute**], "this generation," to something other than the generation of Jesus' contemporaries, all the alternatives (the Jewish people; humanity; the generation of the end-time signs) are finally artificial and represent imposition based on some supposition brought to the text (Luke uses "this generation" also in 7:31; 11:29-32, 50-51; Acts 2:40). This verse is a standing embarrassment to all attempts to see the delay of the *Parasouia as a major Lukan preoccupation. There is, by contrast, no suggestion that this verse is an embarrassment to Luke.¹⁵ * [**parousia** is a Greek word used in some passages on Christ's second coming]

Further comments on the parallel verse in Matthew 24:34 amplify and support the previous remarks:

The [**panta tauta**], "all these things," of this verse can include no more than the same phrase of the preceding verse [24:3] and thus cannot include the coming of the Son of man (so too Blomberg). The phrase refers not only to general marks of the interim period such as tribulation, distress, pseudo-messiahs, and false prophets but specifically, and dramatically, to the desecration of the temple and destruction of Jerusalem (cf. vv 15-22). As in other imminence sayings (cf. 16:28; 10:23; 23:36), all of which like

the present logion are prefaced by the emphatic... "truly I tell you," formula, the main point is that the fall of Jerusalem was to be expected by **that** generation..., those listening there and then to the teaching of Jesus (... "this generation," is used consistently in the Gospel to refer to Jesus' contemporaries; cf. 11:16; 12:41-42, 45; 23:36). The attempt to explain..., "this generation," as the generation alive at the time of the parousia [meaning here Jesus' second coming] or more generally as the human race or people of God goes against the natural meaning of the phrase and makes the words irrelevant both to Jesus' listeners and to Matthew's readers. The fact that, as Lovestam has shown, the expression clearly alludes to a **sinful** generation, one ripe for judgment, fits the fall of Jerusalem (and not merely the end of the age, which is Lovestam's conclusion).¹⁶

Therefore, in view of the force of the phrase "this generation" and the context of Matthew 24:32-33 //, we reject the PM concept that the signs of verses 4-31 and the budding of the fig tree have to do with the second coming of Christ or the establishment of the nation of Israel back in Palestine. John Walvoord is **wrong** when he says:

This [fig tree] illustration is carried over to the second coming of Christ. When the events described in the preceding verses occur, it will be a clear indication of the second coming of Christ being near.¹⁷

Rejecting the PM interpretation of the parable of the fig tree also dismisses as erroneous their view of a strictly literal interpretation of Scripture and Biblical prophecy. They cannot even be consistent as they claim, for they do not believe that the fig tree is literally just a fig tree; they believe it to be spiritually a sign of the restoration of Israel, as the former quote from Hal Lindsey has shown.

There is another, equally erroneous approach to Biblical prophecy and the study of last things (eschatology) which we will now consider.

Realized/Covenant Eschatology

This approach was presented in a book over one hundred years ago,¹⁸ and since that time has been variously held by different men.¹⁹ Max King's name is most closely associated with promoting this doctrine in the Lord's church. His two books, **The Spirit of Prophecy**²⁰ and **The Cross and the Parousia**,²¹ pretty well express the doctrines of those who adopt this view, although there are differences among some who hold to this theory. We will say more on this later.

This system of Biblical interpretation is called "realized eschatology" because it views all Biblical prophecy as already having been realized—that is, it has all come to pass. There are no prophecies yet to be fulfilled according to this view. It is called "covenant eschatology" because it views all prophecy as having been fulfilled in the full establishment of the New Covenant, which it believes occurred at the time of the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem.²² These final things, which all occurred in A.D. 70 and will never occur again, include Christ's second coming, the final resurrection of the dead, the final judgment of all people, the end of the world, and the eternal phase of God's kingdom.

I am using Realized/Covenant Eschatology (hereafter abbreviated as RCE) to refer to the radical position described above, that all last things happened in A.D. 70 and that there will be no future coming of Christ, nor resurrection, nor judgment, etc. There are those who believe that some of the prophecies we normally apply to Christ's second coming (such as the book of Revelation) do have reference to the destruction of Jerusalem, but they

do not deny that Christ will still come again to raise the dead and judge the world.²³

Those who hold to the full or total concept of RCE can only do so by promoting an erroneous approach to Biblical prophecy, in much the same way the PM does. While the fault with the PM hermeneutic (method of Bible study) is to supposedly take everything literally, RCE goes to the extreme in seeking to give a figurative or spiritual application to many prophecies which have some physical application. However, like the PM, they cannot consistently do so without getting themselves into trouble and having to switch from literal to figurative and back again, but without admitting that they do so. Such practices make trying to follow what they are talking about extremely difficult. First, there is the difficulty in trying to track the vocabulary of RCE. They commonly assign different meanings to Bible words, in addition to coining new words to represent their own ideas (such as “Transmillennialism”). Second, the proponents of RCE whom I have read and heard do not seem to be skilled in helping to make difficult matters easier to understand. Third (may God forgive me if I am judging), I seem to sense a kind of “esoteric snobbery” from the RCE adherents I have studied. “Esoteric” means something “designed for or understood by the specially initiated alone” (**Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary**, 10th edition). It is something like the Pentecostals, who claim to speak in tongues and work miracles, exhibiting an air of superiority over those whom they think the Holy Spirit has not so “blessed.” An example is to be found in a taped cassette series I listened to, which is promoted as a “comprehensive overview” of RCE. The two men conducting the discussion are frequently laughing at the positions of others who embrace different end-time beliefs than they do.²⁴ The implications are strong that they just cannot understand how men (like myself) can

promote such ridiculous views, which they consider so obviously contradictory to what they think the Bible is really saying. Perhaps I am being overly sensitive. I confess that there is much about RCE that I find extremely difficult to follow, even from my study of their material, both oral and written.

Proper Biblical Hermeneutics

The PM take all Biblical prophecy literally, as though there must be a literal (which most often means physical) fulfillment for every prophecy. Obviously, there are prophecies where literal physical fulfillment is the only proper application one could make, such as Matthew 24:1-2, but at other times a literal physical fulfillment is absurd (Rev. 12:3-4). In the latter reference, one must recognize that figurative language is used and something less than a literal application is intended. In some prophecies there is a type and antitype fulfillment, such as Hosea 11:1, which is first related to the nation of Israel in Exodus 4:22-23 as the type, but also the antitype, pointing to Jesus in Matthew 2:15. Then too, figurative language can be used to describe what will be a literal, physical event, such as Christ's coming in the destruction of Jerusalem in Matthew 24:29.

A major mistake of RCE is taking prophecies and promises which have to do with physical aspects of man's salvation, redemption, and resurrection and spiritualizing or redefining them to make those passages harmonious with the teaching of RCE. For example, one who reads 1 Corinthians 15 will be brought to the conclusion that the physical bodies of the righteous dead will one day be raised to be incorruptible and the living will have their physical bodies changed into incorruptible bodies for our habitation in the heavenly kingdom of God. Then, through Christ, we will have gained victory over physical death and sin. Paul

does not discuss the departed souls of the saints in 1 Corinthians 15, but he does tell the Corinthians that the immortal spirit will receive an immortal body to house the spirit (2 Cor. 4:16-5:10). Max King's brand of RCE says that there will be no resurrection of departed dead believers. Instead, he opts for a type of "spiritual" resurrection, but not of man's physical body. Paul says that we will be "raised a spiritual body" (1 Cor. 15:44ff), but King is not thinking of us as individuals. The only resurrection King says Paul was talking about is "the change or transition from Judaism to Christianity as it was in the end of that age [meaning A.D. 70]."²⁵ King applies this concept to both 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4. For King (and all RCE adherents) there is **no future coming of Christ and no resurrection of individual Christians.**

King and RCE disciples believe that all of Matthew 24; Mark 13; and Luke 21 (as well as Luke 17) refer completely to the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem. In his debate with the late Gus Nichols, King affirmed:

The Holy Scriptures teach that the second coming of Christ, including the establishment of the eternal kingdom, the day of judgment, the end of the world and the resurrection of the dead, occurred with the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.²⁶

According to King there is really nothing we can know about life after death, for everything we used to think the Bible said about this matter really pertains to the destruction of Jerusalem:

There is, therefore, nothing more to be revealed through inspired writing and nothing more to be fulfilled with respect to what God intended to accomplish within the volume of his Word. This does not mean, however, that God is dead or that the Bible is an antiquated or an

irrelevant message. Obviously, God has now, as always, manifold purposes and designs for His spaceless and limitless universe, including this minute portion in which man now dwells. But these multiple designs are securely contained within the hidden counsels of Him whose ways are past finding out: “The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and our children forever” (Deut. 29:29).²⁷

One might properly ask how King (or anyone) can claim to know that God has “manifold purposes and designs” for the earth and man dwelling upon it **beyond what the Scriptures reveal!** If these “multiple designs are securely contained within the hidden counsels of [God],” how can he even know that they exist? He cannot. We do not intend to be harsh or hyper-critical with King, but he cannot have his cake and eat it too. If nothing revealed remains to be fulfilled, then King cannot know that there is even one good thing which awaits the righteous who die. Those who embrace RCE may not admit it, or want to admit it, but these are the sad and logical consequences of their doctrine that there is “nothing more to be fulfilled” with respect to the Bible’s teaching on final things.

Realized/Covenant Eschatology And Matthew 24 //

What does RCE say in regard to the fig tree in Matthew 24:32-33 //?:

Concerning the signs of the end (Mt. 24:1-31) Jesus said, “Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and putting forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh: So likewise ye, when ye shall see these things, know that it is near, even at the doors” (vv. 32-33). Notice that Jesus said, “know that IT IS NEAR, EVEN AT THE DOORS.” What is the “IT” that would be near, at the door, or, “at hand?” The R.S.V. says, “know that he is near.” In this rendering, “he” means

Christ, whose coming is under discussion (see Mt. 24:3). But Luke writes, “know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh at hand” (Lk. 21:31), and he likewise records that “this generation shall not pass away, till all be fulfilled” (v. 32).²⁸

King properly agrees that the signs of Matthew 24:4-34 // have to do with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, but he denies that verses 35-51 // point to a different coming of Christ at the end of the world for the general resurrection and final judgment. King says that both the questions asked by the disciples (24:3) and the extended responses given by Christ (24:4-25:46) **all** apply to the A.D. 70 events.²⁹

The truth lies between the two extremes of PM, which says practically nothing in Matthew 24 // has been fulfilled, and RCE, which says there is “nothing more to be fulfilled. God’s work through Christ is finished. It is full, complete, and everlasting.”³⁰ What follows will attempt to answer some major objections of RCE **against** the dividing of Matthew 24 into two major sections: (1) verses 4-34 applying to the destruction of Jerusalem, and (2) verses 35-51 applying to the second coming of Christ and other matters pertaining to the end of the world.

The Comings Of Christ

A refusal on the part of RCE to accept that Christ spoke of more than one “coming” during His personal ministry creates confusion on these matters. We do not have space to consider the Old Testament (hereafter abbreviated as OT) passages which speak of Christ’s coming, but the New Testament (NT) presents, after His coming in the flesh (Matt. 1:21-23), at least four comings. Jesus foretold: (1) His coming in power to establish His church/kingdom (Matt. 16:13-19, 28); (2) His coming in judgment at the destruction of Jerusalem (24:1-2, 29-34);

(3) His coming to be present with those who love Him and keep His words (John 14:23), which must take place when we obey the Gospel; and (4) His future final coming in judgment at a time unknown to anyone but God the Father (Matt. 16:27; 24:35-25:46).

While the actual phrase “second coming of Christ” is not in Scripture, Hebrews 9:28 says, “So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear a second time without sin unto salvation.” King accuses us of trying to “sandwich” other comings between a first and second,³¹ which he says is impossible:

There is no scriptural basis for extending the second coming of Christ beyond the fall of Judaism. The physical and spiritual results, and the significance of that event, fill every need and purpose of the coming of Christ. The destruction of Judaism did not leave unfulfilled one single prophecy, promise, or blessing, the fulfillment of which is dependent upon the end of this present material world. This is not an affirmation that this material world will never end, but rather, that the consummation of God's scheme of redemption was not predicated upon the ending of this physical world.³²

King can find four kinds of resurrection in Scripture,³³ but he cannot see more than two “comings” of Christ.

The reason that Hebrews 9:28 speaks of Christ's coming (appearing) a second time, which necessarily implies a first time, is because the first and second comings of Christ are literal, personal comings for salvation (Matt. 1:23; Heb. 9:28). Christ's first personal coming worked out God's plan of salvation through His death, burial, and resurrection. On the first Pentecost following Christ's ascension to heaven, Peter presented that fact in Acts 2:22-47. Since then, man can have forgiveness of past

sins (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38) and the continuing forgiveness of sins if one is a penitent Christian (Acts 8:22; 1 John 1:7-10), and thus an ever present hope of eternal life (Tit. 1:2; 3:7). At Christ's second coming, He will take us into that place of eternal life in heaven, as He appears "apart from sin, to them that wait for him, unto salvation" (Heb. 9:28, ASV). Having already been once for all offered to bear the sins of many, His second coming is not to make sacrifice for sins, but "unto salvation," as He makes final judgment and gives life eternal or everlasting punishment (Matt. 25:46). These comings are personal and literal, at the beginning and end of the redemptive process. His other comings are important comings, but they do not begin nor complete God's plan of salvation, nor are they personal and literal in the sense of Christ's first and second comings. Failure to distinguish between these comings has generated the major errors of RCE.

Christ's coming to establish His kingdom in power came on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 (cf. Matt. 16:28; Mark 9:1). This was not a literal, personal coming, but His power was in evidence through the Holy Spirit, Whom Christ sent (Acts 1:4-8; 2:1-12, 32-33). Peter's audience could "see" Christ exalted to God's right hand through the Spirit's demonstrations and have the faith to act, knowing assuredly that God had made Jesus both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:32-39).

King denies that Matthew 16:28 is a reference to the establishment of the kingdom on Pentecost, for he says that this requires an unnatural break between 16:27 and 16:28, making the former refer to Christ's second coming and the latter refer to the establishment of the church/kingdom, putting some two thousand years between them.³⁴ However, the change in comings between verses 27 and 28 is not unnatural. Jesus is giving an assurance of His promised coming in final judgment by promising

His coming in His kingdom within the life span of some of those in the audience to whom He was speaking (cf. Mark 8:34-9:1). This latter, assured event marked the beginning of His authoritative rule in His kingdom and would be known in the events preached and recorded in Acts 2 and thereafter. With the coming of His church/kingdom, for which He had personally overcome death (cf. Matt. 16:18-19), Christ vouchsafed His promise to come again to “reward every man according to his works” (vv. 27-28).

Christ’s coming in judgment upon Jerusalem was likewise not a personal coming, literally visible to the naked eye (Matt. 24:30; 26:64). His coming in the clouds with power and glory in judgment is reminiscent of God’s promised coming in judgment against Egypt (Isa. 19:1). The judgment upon Jerusalem and the temple would be a sign that the Son of man was enthroned in heaven (Matt. 24:30), much as the Holy Spirit’s power in Acts 2 was also evidence of Christ’s glory and power at God’s right hand (Acts 2:32-36). Although not visible comings in the literal sense, both comings provided an ability to “see” Christ’s glorious power as king over His kingdom. The proof of this was the fulfillment of the events prophesied (Matt. 16:13-19; 24:4-34).

Dividing Matthew 24

Advocates of RCE and much of the general religious world seem to assign a mystical sense and to have an obsessive affinity for the Greek word “**parousia**.” This word, meaning “presence, arrival, coming,”³⁵ is used four times in Matthew 24, but nowhere else in any of the Gospels. **Parousia** is used in five of Paul’s epistles and three of the general letters, but not in Acts or Revelation. In all it is absent from 18 of the 27 NT books. Of its 24 NT occurrences, six refer to the arrival or presence of Paul or his co-workers (1 Cor. 16:17; 2 Cor. 7:6-7; 10:10;

Phil. 1:26; 2:12) and once to the presence of the “man of lawlessness” (2 Thess. 2:9). The remaining seventeen occurrences are divided between Christ’s coming in the destruction of Jerusalem and His second coming (Matt. 24:3, 27, 37, 39; 1 Cor. 15:23; 1 Thess. 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thess. 2:1, 8; Jas. 5:7-8; 2 Pet. 1:16; 3:4, 12; 1 John 2:28). Mark and Luke use the Greek word **erchomai** (or one of its many forms), which simply means “come, to come,”³⁶ to express Christ’s coming, whereas Matthew uses **parousia**. **Erchomai** and its forms are used far more frequently for Christ’s comings than **parousia** (Matt. 10:23; 16:27-28; 23:39; 24:30, 44; 25:6, 10, 13, 19, 27, 31; cf. parallels in Mark and Luke; Luke 18:8; John 14:3, 18, 23; 21:22-23; Acts 1:11; 1 Cor. 4:5; 11:26; Eph. 2:17; 2 Thess. 1:10; Heb. 10:37; Jude 14; Rev. 1:7-8; 2:5, 16; 3:11; 16:15; 22:7, 12, 20; et al.). The point of all this is that neither PM nor RCE can make **parousia** refer to any specific coming of Christ exclusive of any other coming. Only the immediate and total context can signify which coming is meant by the use of **parousia** or any other word used as a reference to a coming of Christ.

While King camps in Matthew 24, seeking to make all the references to the **parousia** relate to Christ’s coming in the destruction of Jerusalem, he runs to Mark’s account in an attempt to limit the scope of the questions of the disciples in Matthew 24:3. Mark 13:4 says, “Tell us, when shall these things be? And what shall be the signs when all these things shall be fulfilled?” Luke 21:7 is nearly the same as Mark. King states:

Clearly, the two part question of **when** and **what sign** in relation to “these things” leaves no room for “these things” to be addressing two widely separated consummations....No division of subject matter inheres in the two part question of **when** and **what sign**, neither can such division be detected in the reply of Christ.³⁷

However, King has it backwards. One does not determine the meaning of the questions asked by Christ's disciples by limiting the discussion to the more narrow passage, but by consideration of the fuller report given by Matthew. The questions as posed in Matthew 24:3, "Tell us when shall these things be? And what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?," indicate that the disciples mistakenly thought that such a devastation as the end of the Jewish temple and Jerusalem would signify the end of the world or age of the Messiah.

Even if King were correct in stating that the disciples were asking about the end of the Jewish age and not the end of the world, he cannot be correct that the end of the Jewish age came nearly forty years after the cross in the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem. The Law of Moses was dead when Christ nailed it to His cross, taking it out of the way (Col. 2:14-16; cf. Gal. 5:4-6). Actually, King is wrong on both counts.

Matthew 24:34 marks the end of Christ's answer as to **when** "all these things" Christ mentioned in verse 2 about Jerusalem's destruction would be accomplished. His coming at the end of time or to end the Messianic age would **not be accompanied by any signs!** According to Mark 13:32 //, no signs could be given, for only God the Father knew the time—not even Jesus knew. The end of the world would come, as surely as Christ's words would stand (Matt. 24:35-36), but there were no signs after Christ's statement in verse 34, closing that part of His response to the time of the temple's destruction (vv. 4-34). Matthew 24:35-51 properly belongs to Christ's second coming, which is different than the destruction of Jerusalem previously revealed.

Realized Eschatology's Greatest Argument?

In an oral presentation on the Olivet Discourse, Tim King, son of Max and current president of their "Living

Presence Ministries,” said that he was in a discussion with a university professor (unnamed) “about the differences when you look at the coordinate teachings of Matthew 24 and Luke 17.” The professor reportedly looked at him and said, “You know, Tim, I think that is your father’s greatest argument.”³⁸ Since this part of the discussion on the tape was Tim King’s assertion that Luke 17:20-37 proves that one cannot divide Matthew 24 as we have suggested, the “professor” must have meant that this is Max King’s strongest argument to prove RCE is true.

What makes Luke 17:20-37, in the mind of some, King’s strongest argument to prove his theories that the A.D. 70 events were Christ’s second coming? Likely it is the contention that, if Matthew 24 cannot be divided and the whole chapter refers to Jerusalem’s destruction, none of the other arguments against RCE are that strong. I do not agree that RCE cannot be defeated other than proving a division in Matthew 24 as we have done, but if Tim King thinks that disproving it is his father’s greatest argument, we want to look diligently at these texts.

Max King wrongly assumes that Luke 17 is a part of the Olivet Discourse. He says, “The Olivet Discourse as recorded in Mt. 24, Mk. 13, and Lk. 17:20-37; 21, has the same time frame as Daniel 7.”³⁹ But the fact that Luke separates this teaching from his chapter 21, which does parallel Matthew’s and Mark’s accounts, shows that it is, in fact, **not** a part of the Olivet Discourse, even though it treats Christ’s second coming. We have already shown that Christ dealt with His second coming and the destruction of Jerusalem at times in His ministry other than the Olivet Discourse. King draws an unwarranted conclusion that Luke 17:20-37 is referring to the destruction of Jerusalem, which to him is the second coming of Christ. While Christ does use some of the same type of language in Luke 17 as He does in Matthew 24, there are good reasons for His

practice without contending that His doing so ruins the argument that Matthew 24 // speaks of two different comings of Christ, divided by verses 4-34 and verses 35-51. King does not think one can compare Luke 17:20-37 with Matthew 24 and come up with any conclusion other than his:

Evidently some have not taken the time to compare Mt. 24 with Luke chapters 17 and 21. Luke puts in the fall of Jerusalem section what Matthew has in the future coming of Christ section—if what is claimed for **two sections** is a legitimate exegesis of the Olivet Discourse.⁴⁰

What King does not admit is that Luke has no dividing markers such as Matthew 24:34-36 //! Luke 17 also was delivered at a different time than the Olivet Discourse. Luke 17:20-18:8, which nearly all commentators agree goes together as a unit of teaching, pertains to Christ's second coming in final judgment, as 18:8 and other markers indicate. After citing the Olivet Discourse parallels, Cecil May wrote:

Luke 17 is a different discourse altogether. It follows a question by the Pharisees as to “when the Kingdom of God should come” (Luke 17:20), a question answered by Jesus by emphasizing the spiritual or inward nature of the Kingdom. So, although Jesus here uses some similar language, it is not necessary to suppose He applies it the same way...Luke 17 is talking about the second coming. Perhaps it is because Luke has already included this discourse, which he alone records, that he does not include the second coming sayings in the Luke 21 discourse. His first emphasis is that the second coming will be public, not secret (Luke 17:23-24). Jesus uses here the same language that He used to tell the disciples not to expect a secret coming during the destruction of Jerusalem (Matt. 24:23-28).⁴¹

One reason given by many commentators for the similarities in language between the two accounts in Luke 17 and Matthew 24 // is the general theme of judgment. Nolland is representative of this observation: “Luke sees the first century judgment in Judea at the hands of the Romans, which culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem, as a first installment of a universal judgment.”⁴²

Consider the following chart that Tim King and Jack Scott offer as proof that Luke 17 and Matthew 24 are both talking about the single event of Christ’s coming in the destruction of Jerusalem. The comparisons on the left-hand side of the chart in lighter print are those matters in Matthew 24:4-34 that pertain to the destruction of Jerusalem. The bold print of the left-hand side relates to those things which I believe pertain only to the second coming of Christ in Matthew 24:35-51. Notice on the right-hand side in Luke 17 that the lighter-print language, which is similar to Matthew, is mixed among the bolder-print sayings. King says this shows the impossibility of neatly dividing Matthew as we have done.

Covenant Eschatology’s Chart⁴³ Comparing Matthew 24 And Luke 17

Matthew 24	Luke 17
17 “him...on housetop”	23 “look here or look there”
23 “Look here...or there”	24 “For as the lightning flashes”
27 “For as the lightning comes”	25 “this generation”
28 “carcass...eagles”	26 “As it was in the days of Noah”
34 “this generation”	27 “They ate...drank...married”
37 “But as the days of Noah”	30 “Son of man...revealed”
38 “eating, drinking, marrying”	31 “He who is on the housetop”
39 “coming of the Son of man”	35 “two women grinding”
40 “two men...in field”	36 “two men...in field”
41 “two women grinding”	37 “body...eagles”

King avers that Luke's mix of light and dark sayings in chapter 17 has to refer to the same things as Matthew, which means that they must all refer to a single event, the A. D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem.

If King's claims about the preceding chart were correct, then it would be wrong to contend that Matthew 24 could be divided into two comings of Christ, with verses 4-34 referring to the destruction of Jerusalem and verses 35-51 to Christ's second coming. At first glance, the chart may look devastating to our position, but in reality the chart overlooks some key information, some of which we have already given, that overturns King's so-called "greatest argument."

First, similarity of words or phrases **does not** mean identity of a person, place, or thing (event). When one is describing similar events, one may use the same type of words to describe two different but similar events or things. Scripture says that God rides the clouds, but not every time this is said is the same time or event in view (Psm. 104:3; Nah. 1:3; Ezek. 19:1-2). In Nahum the judgment was to come upon Assyria; in Ezekiel the judgment was upon Egypt. The troubling of the heavenly bodies such as the sun, moon, and stars (representing the fall of the governing powers of nations) was also used to picture judgment upon Babylon (Isa. 13:10), Egypt (Ezek. 32:7-8), Israel (Joel 2:31; Amos 8:9), and upon the nations of the world (Rev. 6:12-14). These are phrases indicative of the judgment of God and cannot be confined to one event. Jesus used the same language of coming on the clouds in reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (Matt. 26:64), as well as using the troubling of the sun, moon, and stars (24:29). One should not be surprised to see some of the same language used to describe judgment in one NT event being used to describe a similar, but different, event of judgment. Use of the same language would not mean that the two

events were identical if the context required otherwise. We shall show that the comparisons used by King in the chart are either: (1) used in a different context and do not mean the same thing in Luke 17 as in Matthew 24; or (2) that the words and phrases are used in both chapters because of the similarity of the overall **theme of judgment**, but that they refer to different events.

Second, remember that the prophecy about the second coming of Christ in Luke 17:20-37 is not combined with the Olivet Discourse in Luke 21. This Luke 17 discourse was delivered at a different time than Luke 21 //. According to Luke 17:11 and 19:1, 11, 28-29, Jesus had not yet entered Jerusalem for His final time before His death but was traveling toward the city. His triumphal entry into Jerusalem occurred in Luke 19:32-41. According to Luke 17:11 and 18:35, Christ delivered the text of Luke 17:20-37 sometime in His travels between Samaria and Jericho. Therefore, one should not be confused by the similarity of language used by Luke 17, especially with that of Matthew 24. Since Luke 17 had recorded Christ using some of the same language for His second coming on this occasion that He later used in the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24; Mark 13), perhaps Luke did not combine his 17:20-37 with chapter 21, lest his readers confuse the two accounts as King and others have done. King is trying to force together what Luke by inspiration chose to keep separate. With his material on Christ's second coming in chapter 17, Luke did not need to be as detailed in his chapter 21 as Matthew 24 was on this same topic.

When Luke 17 and Matthew 24 are seen as separate lessons given at different times, we know that we must consider the context of each separately. Even though both chapters discuss Christ's second coming, over half of Matthew 24 is given to discussion of Jerusalem's destruction. Luke 17 does not deal with the destruction of

Jerusalem (it is not even mentioned), although he does use some judgment language in speaking of the second coming that Matthew used in a similar way of the destruction of Jerusalem.

Third, since we contend that all of the darker, bold-print statements on the chart refer to Christ's second coming in final judgment, both in Matthew 24 and in Luke 17, we only need to show how the material in lighter print in Luke 17 applies to Christ's second coming, though the similar language in Matthew 24 refers to judgment matters upon Jerusalem.

Comparing Luke 17 With Matthew 24

The setting for the discussion of Christ's second coming in Luke 17 grows out of the demand of the Pharisees to know "when the kingdom of God should come" (v. 20). Jesus' reply that "the kingdom of God cometh not with observation" describes the spiritual nature of His kingdom. Jesus told Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36); therefore, its arrival is not "observable" like world kingdoms which come to power. All earthly kings, such as David, reign before they die, but Christ was raised from the dead to sit on His throne (Acts 2:29-30). Christ's triumphal coronation after His victory over death and ascension to God's right hand would not be visible by human sight, but the results of this enthronement would be made manifest to all. Peter proclaimed the occurrence of this grand event in Acts 2:22-36. There were visible hints of what was to come regarding Christ's kingdom, such as His entry into Jerusalem on the colt of an ass (Luke 19:28-40; Zech. 9:9), but such was not the type of sign of a king the Pharisees expected.

Luke 17: 21—Because Christ's throne was not an earthly one with a physical palace and a territory with physical borders, no one could say, "Lo, here! or lo there!,"

pointing to a specific place on earth as the seat of God's kingdom rule. The kingdom of God is real, but not worldly; it is "within you" or "in the midst of you" (ASV margin). Whether this means that God's kingdom reign is "within" the heart of man governing his life, or "in your midst," referring to Christ's presence as God's Son and Messiah, the kingdom was not the visible tangible entity that the Pharisees had hoped to see come.

Luke 17:22—Verses 22-37 develop in response to the question of the Pharisees and seem to indicate that Christ's reply that "the kingdom of God is in the midst of you" may have direct reference to Jesus as the Son of man. This verse foretells of a time of His absence from their midst (cf. John 14:2-3, 12, 18-20; et al.). In His absence the disciples would desire to see again even "one of the days of the Son of man [when He was personally with them, but] ye shall not see it."

Luke 17: 23—In Christ's absence some would try to deceive the disciples, saying, "See here; or, see there," as though Christ were present back on earth. Jesus warned against being duped by such claims. Matthew 24:23 also refers to the time of Christ's absence when some would say, "Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not." The Lord issued the same type of warning against being deceived by such claims. Both Matthew 24:23 and Luke 17:23 have reference to the time of Christ's absence from the earth and false claims about His presence here, but Matthew's context is rooted in the signs of the destruction of Jerusalem. Luke's passage relates to any time prior to the second coming of Christ in universal judgment. Therefore, the warning about such things is timeless. The claims to be Christ made by men like David Koresh, Sun Yung Moon, and others, are just as groundless as those who made those pretenses prior to the fall of Jerusalem. Matthew 24:23-26 gives more of an urgent emphasis to this warning, perhaps because of the proximity in time of that event,

but Luke's universal and timeless application of the same caution shows that the similar material does not signify that they were part of the identical discourse.

Luke 17:24—This verse promises that what the disciples would desire, “to see one of the days of the Son of man” (v. 22), would come to pass. The disciples need not be deceived by false claims of His coming, for as obvious as lightning striking and streaking across the sky, “so shall the Son of man be in his day.” This is no secret coming of Deity, but obvious. Lightning was used in some theophanies in Scripture, whether accompanying His presence (Exod. 19:16; 20:18) or as His agent in judgment (Psm. 18:9-16). Christ also used “lightning” in a metaphorical sense, speaking of judgment concerning Satan's coming fall “as lightning from heaven” (Luke 10:18). It will be impossible not to know when Christ returns “in his day” (17:30), which is likely a variation of “the day of the Lord” (Isa. 13:6; Joel 2:1; Zech. 14:1; Mal. 4:5), which is a day of judgment.

Again, the passage in Matthew 24:27 relates to “the coming of the Son of man” in judgment upon Jerusalem, which Christ foretold in verse 3. This is similar language used in a similar judgment event, but not the same event. Luke 21:20-24 (which is parallel to Matthew 24), and Mark 13, shows that Christ comes in judgment upon Jerusalem via the armies of the Gentiles (Romans). But Matthew's judgment is local, and Luke 17:20-37 has markers of universal judgment, as there are in the last half of the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24:35-51 //. These markers, shown in the discussion of the following verses, demonstrate that the coming of Christ in judgment in Luke 17 involves all mankind, not just Jerusalem.

Luke 17: 25—The fact that Jesus says, “first [before His day of judgment which will be evident to all] he must suffer many things and be rejected of **this generation**,” does not mean Luke 17 is limited to the time of Jerusalem's

fall. Of course He must suffer many things and be rejected by “this generation” to whom He was speaking, for that was the time frame chosen by God for Christ to come, conduct His ministry, and be crucified and raised from the dead (Gal. 4:4; John 1:10-12; Acts 2:22-24). In God’s plan, Christ was only in the flesh on earth approximately 33 years. However, Jesus did not say to His disciples in Luke 17 that the judgment of the whole world would take place during the lifetime of that generation. He did say that Jerusalem would be destroyed during the time of the same generation to whom He spoke (Matt. 24:4-34). In fact, Luke 18:7-8 implies some substantial passage of time: “And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them?” Marshall suggests that the probable meaning here of “bear long” (Greek, **makrothumeo**) is, “The elect cry to God night and day, but he puts their patience to the test by not answering them immediately...or, they call to him night and day even though (it seems as if) he is dilatory towards them.”⁴⁴ In verse 8, Christ responds in such a way that justifies this concept of a significant passage of time: “I tell you that he will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?” While the word “speedily” might seem to negate the idea of much time, the Greek phrase is **en tachei**, which can refer to “something which happens after a short interval, i.e. ‘soon’, or which happens in a very short space of time, i.e. ‘quickly’, or which happens before men are ready for it and when they do not expect it,”⁴⁵ though Marshall believes here it means “soon.”⁴⁶ “Soon” can be a relative term, depending upon one’s perspective about the matter (cf. 2 Pet. 3:8-9):

A remark about a soon coming implies, nonetheless, a delay. Since delay in vindication may become an excuse to lose faith, Jesus goes

on to say in effect, “Pray and look for the return,” knowing that it will come. Though the delay seems long, after the vindication it will seem short....In comparison to eternity, what is the span of time between Christ’s first and second comings? This point is especially true in light of the vindication’s permanence.⁴⁷

One must consider the use of “speedily” in 18:8 in the context of Christ’s question, “When the Son of man cometh, will he find faith on earth?” While no definite amount of time is specified:

The question as a whole presupposes a time of tribulation for the disciples in which they may be tempted to give up faith because their prayers are not answered; it is meant as an exhortation to take seriously the lesson of the parable that God will certainly act to vindicate them.⁴⁸

One lexicographer says:

aiphindios [sudden] is comparable to **en tachei** [speedily] in the parable of the Widow and the judge....Luke 18:7-8 contrasts the slowness and patience of God—who delays [**makrothumei**], takes a long time to do justice for his people—with his sudden and rapid (**en tachei**] = speedily) intervention. The emphasis is on prompt execution (cf. Rev. 22:12; Plutarch, **Tim.** 21.7). We may interpret “suddenly, all at once, at one stroke” or better “like lightning”: swiftness is a sign of diligence, of a resolute and sovereign will.⁴⁹

These elements indicate that “the Son of man in his day” (Luke 17:24, 30) is not the judgment brought upon Jerusalem and the generation contemporary with Christ, but a universal judgment removed in time from A.D. 70.

Other markers point to Luke 17 involving a broader judgment than Jerusalem. “In **the day** when the Son of man is revealed,” it will be nighttime in one location and

daytime in another place when judgment is rendered (vv. 34, 36). This widespread area, geographically far enough apart for it to be night in one place and daylight in another, proves Luke 17 to be speaking of a judgment beyond Jerusalem. However, this is in harmony with Luke 21:33-35, which deals with the universal judgment of Christ's second coming. There the Lord warned, "Heaven and earth shall pass away," and cautioned, "take heed unto yourselves [lest] **that day** come upon you unawares." The **extent** of the judgment of "that day" is shown in verse 35: "For as a snare shall it come on **all them that dwell on the face of the whole earth.**" This fits with the universal judgment of Luke 17 and shows that the coming of the Lord and judgment Christ prophesied in Matthew 24:35-51, and the parallels in Luke 21:33-36, and Mark 13:31-36, are of **universal scope**, affecting "all of them that dwell on the face of the **whole earth.**" Although the destruction of Jerusalem was tremendously significant, it obviously did not bring judgment on all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. What is more, the judgment of Luke 21:35 speaks of a snare or trap upon all on the whole earth:

The image of a trap describes the quickness and unexpectedness with which that day will snap shut and catch its victim. The day will reveal God's judgment. Jesus' point is to be ready for it so as to not be left out....The end's reality should call one to live prepared for the end, by being faithful to God.⁵⁰

Christians could not be caught in a "snare" by the events in the fall of Jerusalem, for the Lord gave them signs to read which enabled them to flee (Matt. 24:15-35 //).

Luke 17:26-30—Since these verses are part of the second coming section in Matthew 24:35-51, and agree with the second coming theme here in Luke 17:20-37, we have no need to treat them here, except to point out that they

serve the same purpose in both books, pointing to Christ's second coming in universal judgment.

Luke 17:31—"In that day" of the final judgment, the person who is on the housetop is not to enter his house for personal belongings, nor is the man in the field to return back to his house for them. Matthew 24:17-18 and Mark 13:15-16 basically give the same instructions but for different reasons. Matthew and Mark speak of the necessity of a quick departure from Jerusalem and the cities of Judea, fleeing to the mountains to save one's life. No material possessions are worth the risk of being trapped in a city or village and losing one's life trying to get a coat or other things "out of his house." When Christians saw the imminent danger of the Roman armies surrounding Jerusalem, they were to flee to the mountains and not enter the occupied areas (Luke 21:20-21). The "redemption [which] draweth nigh" in Luke 21:28 is that which God provided by the signs to warn them of the life-threatening destruction which would befall those in Jerusalem. Their watchfulness and response of fleeing the city would assure their deliverance. These were part of the signs and instructions given to "this generation [which] shall not pass away, till all be fulfilled" (Luke 21:8-32; Matt. 24:4-34). Matthew's and Mark's admonitions to those on the housetops and in the fields to flee were to preserve their physical lives.

On the other hand, Luke 17:31-33, using the same figures of one on the housetop and one in the field not entering back into the home for possessions, has a different purpose in mind. Luke's use of these situations is metaphorical and twofold. The idea of fleeing from Christ coming in universal judgment cannot seriously be on the mind of the Lord here. There would be no place to flee. What then does He intend to convey? First, there is the need for one to have the proper attitude toward the value

of one's soul versus the value of material possessions. Luke's gospel clearly stresses this teaching from Christ (cf. 12:15-21; 14:26-33; 16:19-31). When Christ comes again, not one material possession will mean anything. Second, there are the implicit warnings of watchfulness and admonition for preparedness in the metaphor. One who is thinking properly about "that day" will be living with focused attention upon the spiritual treasures one can lay up in heaven and have his/her heart given daily to such efforts (Luke 9:23; Matt. 6:19-21). Watchfulness and readiness are frequently emphasized in the second coming of Christ sections of the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24:35-51 //).

Luke 17:32—The additional admonition to "Remember Lot's wife" ties these thoughts together. While she was warned about the judgment to come upon Sodom, she could not free her mind from the material blessings of life there, so she looked back in regret of losing it all and lost much more than her physical blessings. This event admonishes us to look ahead, beyond the things of this world, to the blessings that God has prepared for those who are faithful to His call to be separate from worldly things (2 Cor. 6:14-7:1). When Christ comes, we are to be ready to go with Him, leaving all behind for greater rewards.

Luke 17:33—This verse supports the interpretation above and proves that Luke 17 cannot be discussing the destruction of Jerusalem. "Whoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whoever shall lose his life shall save it." This passage cannot have literal reference to the fall of Jerusalem, for in that event the disciples were given signs and admonitions to flee in order to "save" their lives from that judgment. However, Luke's context is related to proper conduct and receiving final salvation, not escaping judgment on Jerusalem. One who fills his/her life with obtaining material things, excluding a proper relationship

with God, might enjoy physical life now, but the final judgment will bring loss of eternal life:

The first half of the verse emphasizes physical preservation, the second half spiritual preservation. The two halves are laid out in contrastive parallelism so that the second clearly says that a relationship with God defines life. In the end, the one who identifies with God will suffer for it. Seeking to avoid persecution will lead to a lack of commitment ultimately to God....It is a costly choice either way. God does not promise immunity from death and suffering, but he does promise abiding life with him to the one who survives this judgment by the Son of Man. As [Luke] 9:25 says, it profits little to gain the world but lose one's soul.⁵¹

Thus, Matthew's application of one on the housetop dealt with one's attitude toward material possessions that would help that one preserve his/her physical life (Matt. 24:16-18), while Luke's point is the proper attitude towards one's physical goods which lead one to the gaining of eternal life (Luke 17:31-33).

Luke 17:37—The question of the disciples asking, "Where, Lord?," is related to the coming "day when the Son of man is revealed" in the judgment upon the world (vv. 30-36). The request for a specific location was not provided by the Lord, for universal judgment of the world can hardly be pinpointed. Christ's statement, "Wheresoever the body is, there will the eagles be gathered," makes it clear that, when the time comes, "His presence will be clearly indicated, just as the presence of carrion [dead bodies] is clearly indicated by the gathering of vultures overhead."⁵² But there is more to this proverb than visibility. Vultures feeding on the flesh of men is also a sign of judgment (Deut. 28:26; 1 Kings 14:11; 16:4; 21:24; Jer. 7:33; 15:3; 16:4; 19:7; 34:20; Rev. 19:17, 21). The saying here is a maxim or proverb which could be applied to any

situation which fits the meaning of the proverb.⁵³ Similar sayings were common in the ancient world.⁵⁴ Like a common saying today, “Where there is smoke, there is fire,” the maxim can have a wide range of applications:

Judgment will be visible, universal, and permanent. Once separation occurs, there is no turning back. Vultures gather to feed off dead bodies....This point that once judgment is rendered it is final seems the most likely sense. In effect, Jesus is saying, do not worry about where the judgment will occur, for once it comes, it will be too late and all will see it. As such, the point is not the correctness of the judgment...but its finality when it becomes visible. All will see the judgment's horrific finality...The graphic and emotive image of vultures is a warning that the return will be a grim affair. The return of the Son of Man saves some but permanently condemns others. The return will be what was longed for in 17:22, but when it comes it will mean ultimate judgment for those who are not prepared. This is a classic day-of-the-Lord warning to the unprepared.⁵⁵

Thus, one should not wonder that the same image of judgment could be used by Matthew 24:28 to describe the A.D. 70 destruction of Jerusalem and by Luke 17:37 to depict the final judgment of all mankind upon the face of the whole earth (cf. Luke 21:35).

Some attempt to make the word “eagle” (KJV) in Matthew 24:28 and Luke 17:37 refer to the image of the eagle on the battle flags of the Roman armies. However, the Greek word here *aetos* can refer to either the eagle or the vulture; both birds “tear flesh with the beak.” The use of *aetos* in these two passages refers more properly to vultures which feed on dead flesh.⁵⁶ Eagles generally do not eat already dead flesh but prefer to hunt; nor do eagles “gather together” like vultures do.⁵⁷ Therefore, there is no tie to the Roman army between Matthew 24:28 and

Luke 17:37. Rather, this is a proverb or maxim easily applied to any kind of fatal judgment, perhaps spoken by the Lord on more than these two occasions, but used of both the destruction of Jerusalem and the final judgment of Christ's second coming.

Summary

We have shown that there is **not one statement** in Luke 17:20-37 that has common language also used in Matthew 24:4-34 that relates to the same judgment event. The two sections were spoken on different occasions and have different contexts—Luke referring to the final judgment at Christ's second coming and Matthew describing the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

Neither Max King nor any other advocate of RCE can extend the parable of the fig tree beyond Matthew 24:34. Matthew 24:35-51 and its parallels in Mark 13:31-37 and Luke 21:33-36 refer to the yet-to-be second coming of Christ, at which time He will render judgment and reward everyone according to their works. Luke 17:20-37 harmonizes with the latter half of the Olivet Discourse, but is separate from it.

Conclusion

The parable of the fig tree is a short parable, but its meaning and application has far-reaching consequences on how one views the prophetic events in those chapters wherein it is found. The events of which it was a key sign are fulfilled and past, but the tremendous teaching which follows that little parable contains warnings to be watchful and prepared for the second coming of Christ and final judgment, for which no signs were given (Matt. 24:35-25:46).

Jesus will come again, without warning! That unfulfilled prophetic utterance should motivate

unbelievers to obey the Gospel and encourage Christians to watch the way we live, remaining faithfully ready for “that day” (Matt. 24:42, 44).

Endnotes

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3 M. O. Wise, “Temple,” **Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels**, eds. Joel B. Green & Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), p. 812.

4 Gary Workman, “The Millennium,” **Studies in the Revelation**, ed. Dub McClish (Denton, TX: Valid Publications, 1984), pp.193-210; Eddie Whitten, “What Is The 1000 Year Reign of Revelation 20?,” **Premillennialism**, ed. David P. Brown (Houston: Bible Resource Publications, 1998), pp. 231-242.

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8 Ibid, pp. 86-89.

9 Hal Lindsey, **The Late Great Planet Earth** (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan/Bantam, 1970), p. 43.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid, p. 42.

12 “**houtos**,” William F. Arndt & F. Wilbur Gingrich, **A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature**, 2nd edition, rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich & Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 596. Future references to this work will be the familiar **BAGD**, standing for the first letters of the last names of the work: Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker.

13 Darrell Bock, **Luke: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament**, Volume 2, ed. Moises Silva (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), p. 1690.

14 Joel B. Green, **Luke: The New International Commentary on the New Testament**, eds. Ned Stonehouse, F. F. Bruce, & Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), p. 742.

15 John Nolland, **Luke: Word Biblical Commentary**, Volume 35a, eds. David A. Hubbard & Glenn W. Barker (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), p. 1009.

16 Donald A. Hagner, **Matthew: Word Biblical Commentary**, Volume 33b, eds. David A. Hubbard & Glenn W. Barker (Dallas: Word Books, 1995), p. 715. See also A. J. Mattill, **Luke and Last Things** (Dillsboro, NC: Western North Carolina Press, 1979), pp. 96-103. Mattill surveys all of the “this generation” sayings in Luke-Acts and parallel sayings in all other NT references. He concludes:

Upon the basis of linguistic evidence and theological considerations, as well as by a process of elimination of alternative views, we conclude with an impressive group of critics that, “Luke does not give a date, but in his Gospel too Jesus says, the present generation will live to see it all!” (21:32) [103].

17 John F. Walvoord, **The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook** (Wheaton, IL: Scripture Press/Victor Books, 1990), p. 391.

18 J. Stuart Russell, **The Parousia: The New Testament Doctrine of Our Lord’s Second Coming** (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1983, 1999 reprints), original edition ca. 1887.

19 For a history of this doctrine, see W. Terry Varner, **Studies in Biblical Eschatology: Background Study to the A.D. 70 Theory**, Volume 1 (Marietta, OH: Therefore Stand Publications, 1981). Other works which cover a broader range of the doctrines of these people than we will be able to discuss are: Wayne Jackson, **The A.D. 70 Theory: A Review of the Max King Doctrine** (Stockton, CA: Courier Publications, 1990); Curtis A. Cates, **The A.D. 70 Theology** (Memphis, TN: Cates Publications, 1995); Gus Nichols & Max King, **The Nichols-King Debate** (Warren, OH: Parkman Road church of Christ, 1973); and Jim McGuiggan & Max King, **The McGuiggan-King Debate** (Warren, OH: Parkman Road church of Christ, 1975).

20 Max R. King, **The Spirit of Prophecy** (Warren, OH: Max R. King, 1971).

21 Max R. King, **The Cross and the Parousia** (Warren, OH: Max R. King, 1987).

22 More recently, Tim King, current president of “Living Presence Ministries,” which promotes the realized/covenant eschatology theories, has trademarked another name for their view. The term “Transmillennialism” has been chosen to carry their message because it signifies, says Tim King:

that the millennial reign of Christ has transformed the Old Covenant and that [we] are now in the eternal reign of God—who is all in all (1 Cor. 15:28), and who is now transforming all things. [Quest interview: August 25, 1999; Internet site <<http://www.livingpresence.org/articles/Quest.html>>]

23 One such brother is Foy E. Wallace, Jr., **The Book of Revelation** (Nashville: Foy E. Wallace, Jr. Publications, 1966). Another is Rodney Miller, **The Lion and the Lamb** (Orlando, FL: Miller Publications, 1981), pp. 215-217.

24 Tim King & Jack Scott, audio tapes, **Covenant Eschatology: A Comprehensive Overview** (Warren, OH: Living Presence Ministries, 1998). There is also a written study guide that bears the same title that accompanies the tapes.

25 Max King, **Spirit of Prophecy**, pp.198-199.

26 Max King, **Nichols-King Debate**, p. 1.

27 Max King, **Spirit of Prophecy**, p. 392. He basically repeats this statement in **Cross and Parousia**, p. 666.

28 Max King, **Cross and Parousia**, p. 11.

29 Ibid, pp. 342-378.

30 Ibid, p. 669.

31 Max King, **Spirit of Prophecy**, p. 105.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid, p. 191.

34 Max King, **Cross and Parousia**, pp. 12-13.

35 “Parousia,” BAGD, p. 630.

36 “Erchomai,” BAGD, pp. 310-311.

- 37 Max King, **Cross and Parousia**, p. 349.
- 38 Tim King & Jack Scott, "The Olivet Discourse," audio tape, **Covenant Eschatology: A Comprehensive Overview**.
- 39 Max King, **Cross and Parousia**, p. 342.
- 40 Ibid, p. 353.
- 41 Cecil May, "The Destruction of Jerusalem," **Studies in Luke**, ed. Edwin Jones (Knoxville, TN: East Tennessee School of Preaching and Missions, 1988), p. 257.
- 42 Nolland, **Luke**, Volume 35a, p. 861.
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- 45 Ibid, p. 676.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Bock, **Luke**, p.1455.
- 48 Marshall, **Luke**, pp. 676-677.
- 49 Celas Spicq, **Theological Lexicon of the New Testament**, Volume 1, trans. James D. Ernest (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), p. 51 and sixth footnote.
- 50 Bock, **Luke**, p. 1693.
- 51 Ibid, p. 1436.
- 52 Marshall, **Luke**, p. 669.
- 53 Joseph A. Fitzmyer, **The Gospel According to Luke: Anchor Bible Commentaries**, Volume 28a, eds. William F. Albright & David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1985), p. 1173; Green, **Luke**, p. 636; Nolland, **Luke**, Volume 35b, pp. 862-863.
- 54 R. T. France, **Matthew: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries**, ed. Leon Morris (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1985), p. 342.
- 55 Bock, **Luke**, p. 1440.
- 56 Ibid, p. 1439, footnote 29; Nolland, **Luke**, p. 863.
- 57 Harold Van Broekhoven, Jr., "Eagle," **The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia**, Volume 2, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1982 revision), pp. 1-2.
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CHAPTER 19

The Parable Of The Leaven

Tyler Young

Introduction

WHAT IS THE KINGDOM of heaven like? By the form of teaching for which He is most famous, the Master Teacher related to all with “ears to hear” various aspects of God’s kingdom in a series of seven parables¹ recorded in Matthew chapter thirteen. In one of those seven He states, “The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened” (13:33; cf. Luke 13:20-21, which begins with the Lord asking the question, “Whereunto shall I liken the kingdom of God?”). Though the briefest of the parables of Christ, the parable of the leaven is nonetheless substantial and every bit as thought-provoking as the others used by the Lord in this context and elsewhere.

After the controversy occasioned by Jesus’ healing of a man possessed by a demon, Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea side:

And there gathered unto him great multitudes, so that he entered into a boat, and sat; and all the multitude stood on the beach. And he spake unto them many things in parables (Matt. 13:1-3a).

According to Matthew’s account, the Lord began by setting forth the dissemination and reception of the Word of the

kingdom in the parable of the sower. Next, He illustrated the obstacles to the success of the kingdom in the parable of the tares. Before going on to stress the worth of the kingdom in the parables of the hidden treasure and pearl of great price, and then the need for faithfulness in the kingdom in the parable of the net, Jesus discussed the beginnings, growth, and influence of the kingdom of God in the parables of the mustard seed and leaven.

Though the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven form a pair, as much as they have in common, they are not, as it might first appear, mere repetitions of precisely the same point. Closer inspection reveals that each has a different emphasis. While they both relate, in different forms, the start, gradual expansion, and increase of the kingdom, the former deals more with the success of the kingdom in comparison to its modest beginnings, while the latter addresses the hidden operation of the Gospel of the kingdom and its effect in the world. Both are fascinating in the thoughts they provoke, but our attention turns now to what our Lord taught by comparing the kingdom of heaven to leaven hidden in meal.

Analysis Of The Parable

“The Kingdom Of Heaven Is Like Unto Leaven”

By the above expression, we understand Jesus to be speaking not just of the kingdom itself but of the principles of its increase. In this regard it is like unto—not merely leaven itself—but leaven hidden in three measures of meal. How one interprets the parable all hinges on how he understands the term “leaven” is being used here. Leaven, a substance such as yeast used to produce fermentation in dough or liquid, is used consistently in Scripture as a symbol of corruption and evil influence. For example, the Israelites were commanded to remove, under penalty of

being “cut off,” all leaven from their houses during the entirety of the feast of unleavened bread (Exod. 12:15-20). The blood of the Paschal lamb of the Passover sacrifice was not to be offered with leavened bread (23:18). From the flour cakes offered by the priests upon the altar of Jehovah, leaven was also excluded (Lev. 2:11-13; 6:14-18). It is reasonable to assume that the reason for the banning of leaven in these cases was the idea that the fermentation process implied corruption.

This connotation continues in the New Testament. In warning His disciples, Jesus characterized the hypocrisy and false teaching of the Pharisees as “leaven” (Matt. 16:6, 12; Luke 12:1). When Paul admonished the church at Corinth to expel the impenitent fornicator from their fellowship, he reminded them that “a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump” (1 Cor. 5:6) and added:

Purge out the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, even as ye are unleavened...wherefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth (5:7-8).

He used the same terminology to warn the churches of Galatia of the influence of false teachers in their midst (Gal. 5:9).

Based on the negative connotation of leaven in both Old and New Testament texts, certain expositors allege that consistency demands the reference to leaven in the parable before us to also be understood as representing corruption. In their view, the parable of the leaven must be a prophecy of the introduction of false teaching into the church, resulting in the corruption of the body of Christ. For instance, Lockyer argues that the woman in the parable is the Roman church, the meal is the true church, and the fact that the woman “hid” the leaven represents the subtle

and insidious methods of Satan in infiltrating the church with heresy from within. He concludes: “Simply put, the Parable of the Leaven represents degeneracy in power, a breaking in upon divinely ordered fellowship, the corrupting influence of apostasy.”²

There are a number of reasons that others, including this writer, hold that such an interpretation of the parable, though plausible and apparently consistent with Scripture and history, is not the best one. First, the parable is clearly connected with the previous one of the mustard seed, which is understood most naturally as speaking of the positive advance and resultant blessings—not corruption—of the kingdom of God. Second, such a view makes the parable end with the religion of Christ being finally and fully destroyed (“till it was all leavened”), an implication which seems too dark for the context and suggests the overthrow of Christ’s kingdom (for once all is leavened, it can never be unleavened again). Third, while it is true that leaven is elsewhere used of corruption, this is essentially because of its permeating qualities (a little leaven leavens “**the whole lump**”).

It is reasonable, then, to understand Jesus as using leaven here merely with reference to the operation of it without implying also the sense of defilement. It is simply not the case that types and symbols must always have as rigid an interpretation as some argue in the case of leaven. A dove is used in Scripture as a symbol of both silliness and simplicity (Hos. 7:11; Matt. 10:16); a serpent of both deception and wisdom (Rev. 20:2; Matt. 10:16); a lion of the fierce and predatory nature of Satan on the one hand, and the kingly estate and conquering strength of Christ on the other (1 Pet. 5:8; Rev. 5:5). It must be admitted, then, that, although there may be features which are common to different uses of the same figures, symbols need not always stand for exactly the same thing. They may

carry in one place a noble sense, in another, an evil one. That understood, it is not necessary to see leaven in the parable as a symbol of defilement.

The point of comparison, then, would be this. A small amount of leaven is capable of influencing a much larger mass. This was Paul's point in using the figure of leaven to warn the church about tolerating sin in their midst (1 Cor. 5:6; Gal. 5:9). Once introduced, it operates quietly, unseen as it permeates the whole. Though it seems small in comparison to the lump, it dramatically alters all the dough with which it comes into contact, making it lighter and more palatable. In this the leaven in the meal provides a most fitting analogy for the effect of the Gospel in the hearts of men and, in turn, the world as a whole. This will be explored further in the "Lessons" section below.

"Which A Woman Took, And Hid In Three Measures Of Meal, Till It Was All Leavened"

Some see in the woman the church of Christ as the agent of God in introducing the Gospel into the world, but more likely Jesus referred to a woman in the parable because bread making was a household duty of women in preparing food for their families. Typical of His parables, the Lord refers here to a common aspect of life familiar to His hearers. As a child the Lord Himself must have witnessed His own mother, over and over again, kneading dough to feed her husband and children. The **International Standard Bible Encyclopedia** describes the process:

The form of leaven used in bread-making and the method of using it were simple and definite. The "leaven" consisted always, so far as the evidence goes, of a piece of fermented dough kept over from a former baking. . . . The lump of dough thus preserved was either dissolved in water in the kneading-trough before the flour was added, or was "hid" in the flour (AV "meal") and kneaded along with it.³

The amount, three measures of meal, is an ephah, or about eight to twelve quarts. This was the same amount Sarah prepared for the angelic visitors to Abraham near Sodom and Gideon offered to the angel in Ophrah (Judg. 6:19). In the three measures, some⁴ imagine an allusion to the body, soul, and spirit of man; others, the human race represented in three descendants of Noah. These seem fanciful. More likely the amount is simply that which was typically prepared at one time (cf. 1 Sam. 1:24).

It is of note that the woman “took” the leaven—it was not already a part of the meal. Perhaps by this Jesus is suggesting the working of Gospel was not a result of a philosophy or powers already existing in the world, but was introduced into the world by Divine revelation (Eph. 3:3-5) and thus brought about a kingdom “not of this world” (John 18:36). Also, the fact that the leaven was “hid” in the meal should not be overlooked. As leaven operates from within, so the Gospel works its wondrous influence from within the heart. It is not forced on the individual from without, as the followers of Mohammed advanced the Muslim religion with the sword or as Roman Catholic authorities attempted in the awful inquisitions of the Middle Ages. Rather, the changes it produces begin within the individual who “hides” it in his heart (Psm. 119:11), and the effect or fruit of it is then seen without. In this sense, “The kingdom of God cometh not with observation....For lo, the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:20-21). The advance of the kingdom of God is not seen in armies marching through the streets. Like the action of leaven, its working is silent and unseen, for the power of God’s Word begins to transform lives by moving in the spirit of those who receive and submit to it (Luke 8:15; Heb. 4:12).

This is true of both the individual in particular and society in general. The religion of Christ brought

revolutionary changes first in the Roman world, but it did so from the bottom up by acting like leaven in the hearts of men. That is, as the principles taught and demonstrated by Jesus Christ were received and put into practice in the lives of its citizens, the Empire was gradually changed. As Trench put it, “Working from center to circumference, by degrees it made itself felt, till at length the whole Roman world was, more or less, leavened by it.”⁵ Will Durant, author of a definitive, multi-volume survey of world history, observed:

There is no greater drama in human record than the sight of a few Christians, scorned or oppressed by a succession of emperors, bearing all trials with a fiery tenacity, multiplying quietly, building order while enemies generated chaos, fighting the sword with the word, brutality with hope, and at last defeating the strongest state that history has ever known. Caesar and Christ had met in the arena, and Christ had won.⁶

Notice his assessment of Christians “multiplying quietly.” Such is the operation of the leaven of Christ’s kingdom.

To take the expression “till it was all leavened” to mean all the world will finally be converted by the Gospel would be pressing the parable too far. The words may suggest the pervasive power of the Gospel to influence for good all souls and cultures with which it comes into contact. Wherever the Word of the kingdom is received, it thoroughly permeates all of life, so that no part of it is left unaffected. Once more, we note Trench’s comments:

We may also fairly see in these words a pledge and assurance that the word of life, received into any single heart, shall not there cease its effectual working, till it has brought the whole man into obedience to it, sanctifying him wholly,

so that he shall be altogether a new creation in Christ Jesus. It shall claim every region of man's being as its own, and make its presence felt through all.⁷

Lessons

The Nature Of The Influence Of God's Kingdom

As noted above, leaven works silently, but effectively. No wonder the Lord used its operation to speak of His influence in the world. Quite to the contrary of the Jewish expectations of the Messiah, Jesus did not come with great pomp to advance an earthly kingdom by military might. His ministry was unostentatious, as foretold by Isaiah, who said, "He will not cry, nor lift up his voice, nor cause it to be heard in the street. A bruised reed will he not break, and a dimly burning wick will he not quench: he will bring forth justice in truth" (Isa. 42:2-3; Matt. 12:15-20). It was Jesus Himself—His example, His humility, His love, His sacrifice on the cross—and the profundity of His teaching which penetrated the hearts of men, bringing the kingdom of God into the world. It is the Word of the cross, the preaching of the Gospel—a stumbling block to the Jews, foolishness to the Gentiles—which is the power of God to save (1 Cor. 1:18; Rom. 1:16).

It is disturbing therefore to see in our increasingly secularized culture, with its declining interest in traditional religion, brethren who have abandoned the Word of God for sensational schemes to attract worldly people who refuse to be impressed by the simple, straightforward teaching of the Gospel. Performance worship has become a popular means of trying to draw crowds and entertain men into the kingdom who will not be moved by the mere proclamation of saving truth. The slick marketing techniques of mega-churches are being utilized by brethren anxious to increase the kingdom of

God by their own wisdom. They have forgotten that the kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven which a woman hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened; that the kingdom of God is advanced by the leaven of God's Word, as it is taught by and demonstrated in the lives of God's people. No gimmick or fad can bring about the genuine transformation which can only be accomplished by the leavening influence of Christ, as men learn of Him through His Word, see Him in the lives of His disciples, and embrace His truth.

The Extent Of The Influence Of The Kingdom Of God

Volumes have been written about the tremendous impact of Christ and His kingdom in history. As a small amount of leaven quietly permeates the meal in which it is placed, gradually transforming the whole mass ("a little leaven leavens **the whole lump**"), so the life and teaching of just one individual, a single man of a despised race from an obscure place, literally revolutionized the world. One writer eloquently summarized this point in an oft-cited piece titled, "One Solitary Life":

He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village, where He worked in a carpenter shop until He was thirty. Then for three years He was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family or owned a home. He did not go to college. He never visited a big city. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place where He was born. He did none of the things usually accompanied with greatness. He had no credentials but Himself.

He was only thirty-three when the tide of public opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied Him. He was turned over to His enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between thieves. While He was dying, His

executioners gambled for His garments, the only property He had on earth. When He was dead, He was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

Nineteen centuries have come and gone, and today He is the central figure of the human race. All the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man on this earth as much as that one solitary life.

Tragically, we are witnessing an alarming growth in anti-Christian bigotry in our nation today. Rather than appreciating the profoundly positive impact that Biblical principles have had upon the shaping of the world—Western civilization in particular, and especially the United States of America—the intellectual elite, the mainstream media, and the entertainment industry hold those who profess the Christian religion in contempt. Rulings by the nation’s highest courts have essentially legalized discrimination against professing Christians, chipping away at their Constitutional rights to free speech and freedom of religion. More and more, it is believed that any expression of faith or influence of the Bible in our public institutions is a threat to the nation.

Revisionists have purged from many textbooks the positive role that the Bible and professing Christians have played in history.⁸ While glossing over or ignoring altogether the fact that multiplied millions have been murdered as a result of the atheistic philosophy of communism, they emphasize instead atrocities committed in the name of Christ, such as the crusades, the inquisition, and the Spanish Conquistadors. Given the treatment “Christianity”⁹ has been given in recent years by the media and academia, it is little wonder that many believe the religion of Christ is at best irrelevant to modern society and at worst a lingering blight in the world’s history. The

facts prove otherwise. The widespread ignorance of the tremendous positive contributions of “Christianity” to both the ancient and modern worlds is frustrating and shameful.

To those who are ignorant of or attempt to deny the historical record, we should not be ashamed to affirm with confidence that the principles taught by Jesus Christ have done more to alter the world for good than any other movement or force in the history of mankind. This fact is well documented by Dr. D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe in **What if Jesus Had Never Been Born?**:

To get an overview of some of the positive contributions Christianity has made through the centuries, here are a few highlights:

- Hospitals, which essentially began during the Middle Ages.
- Universities, which also began during the Middle Ages. In addition, most of the world's greatest universities were started by Christians for Christian purposes.
- Literacy and education for the masses.
- Capitalism and free enterprise.
- Representative government, particularly as it has been seen in the American experiment.
- The separation of political powers.
- Civil liberties.
- The abolition of slavery, both in antiquity and in more modern times.
- Modern science.
- The discovery of the New World by Columbus.
- The elevation of women.
- Benevolence and charity; the good Samaritan ethic.
- Higher standards of justice.
- The elevation of the common man.
- The condemnation of adultery, homosexuality, and other sexual perversions. This has helped to preserve the human race, and it has spared many from heartache.

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- High regard for human life.
 - The civilization of many barbarian and primitive cultures.
 - The codifying and setting to writing of many of the world's languages.
 - Greater development of art and music. The inspiration for the greatest works of art.
 - The countless changed lives transformed from liabilities into assets to society because of the gospel.
 - The eternal salvation of countless souls....
- All of these benefits have their origins in the Christian faith.¹⁰

In the remainder of the book, the authors proceed to provide abundant documentation of these points throughout the book. It should be kept in mind that these authors are sectarians and are using the term “Christian” of all religious groups professing belief in Christ and the Bible. While Christ has but one true church, and it is not a denomination, nor is it composed of denominations—in fact, Scripture condemns the very concept of denominationalism (John 17:20-21; 1 Cor. 1:10; Eph. 4:4-6)—it is nevertheless true that the basic principles of morality taught by Christ have exerted an enormous impact on the world, even through professed “Christians” who have practiced a perverted “form” of “Christianity.” We can recognize this without condoning their false religion.

Consider further a few examples of the leavening influence of the teaching of Christ. The love of Christ, as reflected in the love of His followers for each other and all men—even their enemies—had a profound impact in the ancient Roman Empire. Oxford scholar Dr. Robin Lane Fox noted: “When Christians were brought to die in the arena, the crowds, said Tertullian, would shout, ‘Look how these Christians love one another.’”¹¹ Few today would deny we should love our fellow man, but this kind of brotherly love was revolutionary in the Roman world. And down through

history, that love has motivated those professing Christ to extend compassion and benevolent aid in a way unheard of before. As Kennedy and Newcombe point out, prior to the coming of Christ we find no trace of any organized charitable efforts. But due to the influence of Jesus Christ in the lives of men, the needs of countless poor and helpless men, women, and children have been helped through the churches, hospitals, orphanages, and other benevolent institutions which would not have existed were it not for Christ. How many hospitals have secular humanists' organizations established? What relief have atheists' institutions provided for destitute children?

The gradual, leavening influence of the teaching and life of Christ has dramatically elevated the treatment of man by his fellow man. Horrific practices of the ancient world such as crucifixion and the brutality of gladiatorial games were abolished. Though deeply rooted in the fabric of Roman society, slavery was eventually abrogated. True, the New Testament writers did not call for an immediate overthrow of the institution of slavery. Instead slavery was regulated and mitigated by the Gospel of Christ with a view toward the time when it would wane and finally disappear, as it did both in ancient and modern times by the Gospel's leavening influence. Though many characterize the Bible as repressive to women, in reality Christianity has done more to elevate the place and treatment of women than any other movement in history. In Muslim, Hindu, and communist nations, women are still largely treated like property, while the freedoms and equal rights and protection of women under the law in Western society are an ultimate result of Christian teaching.

Because of the Christian view¹² of man uniquely being made in the image of God, man's estimation of the value of human life increased, which resulted in a historical transformation in the treatment of the elderly, the weak,

the infirmed, the unborn, and the newborn. As the traditional Judeo-Christian morality is abandoned and systematically opposed in modern Western culture, belief in the sanctity of human life is being undermined. What are the results? Over thirty-eight million babies have been slaughtered—with the sanction of law!—in the American abortion holocaust. There is a new lump, a generation in place that is without the leaven of the Gospel as it existed in previous ones, and the consequences are school shootings, granny dumping, baby dumping, and Jack Kevorkian.

Many raised in the present, post-Christian era would be surprised to learn that one of the great testimonies to the leavening power of the principles of Christ is the United States of America itself. While Judeo-Christian beliefs are held up to ridicule by the media and our “Christian” heritage is denied and deprecated, the truth is that we in America enjoy a degree of freedom and civil liberty unprecedented in the history of the world largely because of the influence of the Bible in the founding and forming of our nation. Our Constitutional form of government can be traced back ultimately to traditions of law and government based on fundamental Biblical principles. John Quincy Adams once said, “The highest glory of the American Revolution was this: it connected in one indissoluble bond, the principles of civil government with the principles of Christianity.”¹³ Alexis de Tocqueville, after carefully observing American life in 1830, wrote:

There is no country in the whole world in which the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America and there can be no greater proof of its utility, and of its conformity to human nature, than that its influence is most powerfully felt over the most enlightened and free nation on earth.¹⁴

Sadly, his assessment is rejected by most today. Instead of acknowledging and appreciating the fact that respect for Biblical principle is the basis for the unparalleled freedom and prosperity which has made us the envy of the world, we are told instead that Christianity, with its absolute moral code, is an impediment to freedom.

Much more could be added about the founding fathers' attitude toward the Bible and the resulting effect upon our culture, as well as the present reversal of conditions due to the departure from that attitude. The evils which plague America today—including increased suicide, violent crime, unwed pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases among our youth, the breakdown of the home, the overall deplorable state of public education, and the frightening devaluing of human life—can all be traced back to the lack of Christ's leaven in the culture. Nearly 150 years ago, William Holmes McGuffey offered a warning in this regard. McGuffey was an outstanding 19th-century educator whose Christian-based textbooks were once widely used in America's public schools and are today considered educational classics. They made a significant contribution to the molding of our national character over several generations. In McGuffey's **Eclectic Reader** of 1854 we find these somber words:

If you can induce a community to doubt the genuineness and authenticity of the Scriptures, to question the reality and obligations of religion; to hesitate, undecided, whether there be any such thing as virtue or vice; whether there be an eternal state of retribution beyond the grave; or whether there be any such being as God; you have broken down the barriers of moral virtue, and hoisted the flood gates of immorality and crime. I need not say that when a people have once done this, they can no longer exist as a tranquil and happy people....Avarice, perjury, ambition, and revenge would walk through the land, and render it more like the

dwelling of savage beasts than the tranquil abode of civilized and Christianized men.

What McGuffey is describing is a culture without the leaven of God's truth. It is a grim picture of the state toward which we are heading. Indeed, we have already arrived.

The unsurpassed and profoundly positive influence of Christianity in the world is compelling evidence of its Divine origin. And the conditions which existed before it came into the world and which now exist where it has not been permitted to flourish, or where it is being forsaken, are a testimony of the desperate need for it.

Conclusion

Leaven does not work instantly or audibly, but gradually and quietly. A small amount affects the whole. It is easy to see, then, why Christ likened the kingdom of God to leaven hidden in meal. When God's Word is hidden in the heart, it has the power to transform our lives and, in turn, our homes, our schools, our communities, our nations, our world. For the leaven of God's Word to influence our families and our world, we must teach it and put it into practice. For leaven to work, it must come into contact with that which it is to ferment. Just so, we must allow the love and truth of our Savior and His kingdom to affect every part of our lives, as we interact with the world around us. May we be the light, the salt, the leaven God would have us to be.

Endnotes

1 In the list of parables of the kingdom in Matthew 13, some would include the parable of the householder recorded near the close of the chapter (13:52), making eight. Others would place it in a category by itself for the reason that it does not begin with the typical expression used in six of the previous parables, "the kingdom of heaven is like...", but with, "the scribe

who hath been made a disciple to the kingdom of heaven is like....” Though it still deals in a general sense with the kingdom, the fact that it more specifically points to the scribe seems to justify categorizing it separately from the other parables in the chapter.

2 Dr. Herbert Lockyer, **All The Parables of the Bible** (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1963), p. 196.

3 **International Standard Bible Encyclopedia**, Volume 3, ed. James Orr (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1956), p. 1862.

4 In **Notes on the Parables of Our Lord**, Trench refers to Jerome’s suggestion of the three measures representing body, soul, and spirit as reasonable (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1953), pp. 120-121.

5 Ibid, p. 122.

6 Will Durant, **Caesar and Christ: A History of Roman Civilization and of Christianity From Their Beginnings to A.D. 325** (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944, 1972 renewal), p. 652.

7 Ibid.

8 Though the world dates time with reference to Christ, some “scholars” are working to replace the usage of B.C. (before Christ) and A.D. (Latin, **Anno Domini**, “In the year of the Lord”) with B.C.E. (before common era) and C.E. (common era). This is a typical example of the efforts of those who want to expunge acknowledgment of Christ from culture.

9 I am using the term “Christianity” in this context, not of the true church of Christ, but only in the popular sense of those who profess to believe in Christ in all of the various Protestant and Catholic sects. By including denominations in the scope of “Christianity” in this context, I am not intending to suggest that there are faithful Christians in denominations, in the strict, Biblical sense of the word “Christian.”

10 D. James Kennedy & Jerry Newcombe, **What if Jesus Had Never Been Born?** (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1994), pp. 3-4.

11 As cited by Ibid, p.31.

12 The view of man uniquely made in the image of God has its foundation in Judaism, but this view of man was extended outside of Israel to the world by the spread of Christianity.

13 As cited by Kennedy & Newcombe, p. 82.

14 Ibid, p. 88.

CHAPTER 20

The Parable Of The Rich Fool

Ronnie Hayes

Introduction

IT IS A GREAT privilege to have the opportunity to participate in this wonderful lectureship series. I want to thank brother Clarke and all of the elders of this good congregation for the invitation. I appreciate your confidence in me, and it is my prayer for the success of this endeavor.

I have been assigned the “Parable of the Rich Fool,” which is found in Luke 12:13-21. It is important for us to understand the terms as we look at this parable. First, what is a parable? It comes from a compound Greek word: “**para,**’ beside and **ballo,**’ to throw.”¹ So, literally, it means “to throw beside.” We do this very thing when we take something which is very familiar to illustrate something and to help someone understand. To illustrate, we could be speaking of something very hard, and, growing up in Birmingham, Alabama, I might suggest to you that it is as hard as steel. If you were from Birmingham, this would be familiar to you, and you would get the meaning. Often, a parable is described as “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.” Christ used familiar illustrations to get His deeper meaning across.

In this parable, Christ is speaking of a “rich fool.” By “rich,” Christ has reference to wealth. Money or possessions are not the problem, but the love of them is:

But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows (1 Tim. 6:9-10).

Paul Butler suggests that it was the love of money which:

1. Caused Judas to betray Christ, lose his life, his self-respect, and his eternal soul (John 12:4-6; Matt. 26:14-16).
2. Caused Ananias and Sapphira to lie to God and receive sudden death (Acts 5:1-11).
3. Caused Achan to steal at Jericho and all Israel to be defeated at Ai, and for it he and his family were destroyed (Josh. 7:1ff).
4. Caused a young man to reject Christ and to go away sorrowful (Mark 10:17-22).
5. Caused some to teach things they ought not (Tit. 1:11; 2 Pet. 2:1-3).
6. Caused some to turn God's house into a house of merchandise (John 2:14-15) and a den of robbers (Matt. 21:12-13).
7. Caused Elisha's servant to lie and to be made a leper (2 Kings 5:22-27).
8. Caused Saul to disobey God Who gave him victory in war (1 Sam. 15:9-23), and for it Saul was rejected.
9. It is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim. 6:10), including murder (Ezek. 22:12) and many foolish and hurtful lusts (1 Tim. 6:9).
10. It is the cause of domestic troubles (Prov. 15:27).
11. It causes some to be led astray from the faith (1 Tim. 6:10).
12. It causes some to be pierced though with many sorrows (1 Tim. 6:10).²

As you can see, many are controlled by their possessions, rather than controlling their possessions.

There is nothing inherently wrong with riches, but, when the love of money controls our life, there is nothing that we will not do. The Bible repeatedly warns us of the perils of riches. Riches can cause us to forget God:

And when thy herds and thy flocks multiply, and thy silver and thy gold is multiplied, and all that thou hast is multiplied; Then thine heart be lifted up, and thou forget the Lord thy God, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage (Deut. 8:13-14).

Riches can give a false sense of security: “Trust not in oppression, and become not vain in robbery: if riches increase, set not your heart upon them” (Psm. 62:10). Riches can hinder our entrance into heaven (Matt. 19:23), and they can cause us to “choke the word and it becometh unfruitful” (Mark 4:19). The question we must ask ourselves is, “Do we control our possessions, or do they control us?”

Next, we have to understand the term “**fool.**” H. Leo Boles suggested that the rich man was a fool because:

he lacked sense, or good judgment. (Luke 11:40; 2 Cor. 11:19) This man was foolish because he was not living with the right aim or motive; he was a miserably misguided man; his mistake was fatal. While the rich man was telling his soul of the abundance stored up for years, the swift messenger of God came and said to him; “This night is thy soul required of thee.” This was a striking rebuke of the man’s soliloquy. How awful do these words of God peal forth, as thunder from the bosom of a dark cloud, darkening the heavens, which but a few moments previous were glowing with the splendor of the noonday sun. How disappointed this man was!³

In the book of Proverbs, we can see that the fool is one who has access to the Word of God but has rejected it

(Prov. 10:8; 12:15; 15:5; 17:15-16, 28; 18:2; 23:9; 24:7; 26:4-5, 12). The wise person is one who has had access to the Word of God and been obedient to its instructions (1:5). Our Lord compared the foolish man and wise man when He pointed out that the wise man would build his house on the rock, while the foolish man would build his house upon the sand (Matt. 7:24-27). Jimmy Clark says that, when God calls this man a fool, it

reveals the mind of God toward such thinking and living. First, God calls him a fool. The world would call him wise and thrifty, but God abhors his character. Second, the man did not realize the weakness of man to hold to his life. Solomon said, "Boast not thyself of tomorrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth" (Prov. 27:1). James said, "Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that" (Jas. 4:14-15). Third, the man did not realize that he is a steward, not the owner. The phrase "thy soul shall be required of thee" denotes that it was not just the ground and the fruits and the barns that he was a steward of. He was a steward of the life that God had given him and now he was to give an account of his life. Fourth, the man did not realize that material things do not benefit the soul of man. He could not save his soul by any amount of any kind of substance. He had nothing to offer God for God owned everything anyway. Fifth, the man had no control over the things that he had accumulated when he departed from his earthly life. Solomon wrote, "Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have shewed myself wise under the sun. This is also vanity" (Eccl. 2:18-19).⁴

As we continue to study the parable of the rich fool, we want to look at three areas: (1) The Setting, (2) The Sense, and (3) The Statement.

The Setting Of The Parable (Luke 12:13-14)

To get the complete picture of this parable, one must go back to Luke 11. In Luke 11:37, Christ enters into the house of one of the Pharisees, and we see the scribes and the Pharisees as they try “to catch something out of his mouth” (11:54). Clark says:

The context of chapter twelve is seen in chapter eleven and verse thirty-seven. Jesus had been in a house of a certain Pharisee to dine with him. The Pharisee became very disturbed when he saw that Jesus had not washed before dinner (11:38). When Jesus reproved the Pharisee for his dissimulation, a certain lawyer pointed out that the words concerning the Pharisee reproached lawyers as well (11:45). Jesus did not play politics with these, but he struck deep at the root of their problem as well. Luke records that as Jesus was continuing to speak, the scribes and the Pharisees continued to provoke him to try to catch Jesus in his words to accuse him (11:53-54). Therefore, the setting of Luke chapter twelve finds Jesus in a situation which was very typical for him when he was around people. The teaching of Jesus was twofold: to tear down and pluck up error, and to build up and plant the truth. Chapter twelve is a chapter which reveals the problem of false teaching and the consequences that such brings.⁵

In the midst of this attack Christ gives several warnings. Coffman suggests that it is a series of nine warnings:

1. Warnings against the leaven of the Pharisees (Luke 12:1-7).
2. Warnings against the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (vv. 8-12).

3. Warnings against covetousness (vv. 13-21).
4. Warnings against anxieties (vv. 22-34).
5. Warnings against failure to “Watch” (vv. 35-40).
6. Warnings against unfaithfulness (vv. 41-48).
7. Warnings against divisions due to God’s word (vv. 49-53).
8. Warnings against ignoring the signs of the time (vv. 54-56).
9. Warnings against failure to make peace with God now (vv. 57-59).⁶

It is interesting to note that the parable of the rich fool comes on the heel of a “social conflict.” Here is one brother asking the Lord to be a “judge or divider” over their inheritance (Luke 12:13-14). Christ gives leaders in the church some insight on how to handle some problems: **“don’t get involved!”** There are some problems that preachers and elders need to learn to stay out of! If the Lord’s body gets bogged down in every conflict, it finds little or no time to seek the lost. What a tragedy! Let’s don’t lose sight of why we are here. Christ’s mission was, “For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost” (19:10). Our mission is to “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned” (Mark 16:15-16).

Social conflicts are always going to be with mankind. Christ said, “For ye have the poor always with you; but ye have not always” (Matt. 26:11). This is not an attempt to say they are not important. Abortion and euthanasia are plagues on humanity. The best way to overcome these: **“get Christ in their life!”** Paul could have launched into some tantrum about slavery (Tit. 2:9-10; Philemon), but instead he simply told servants to be the best they could be. The Bible is often criticized for not taking a major role in stamping out these injustices. The truth of the matter is that the Bible has dealt with these problems

by the introduction of the Savior. What the world needs is Christ, and all of these problems would fade away.

The Sense Of The Parable (Luke 12:15)

By the sense of the parable, I mean, what is the true meaning of the parable? What did Christ want those who were listening to Him to get out of this story? Christ points to what the real meaning of life is, “Man’s life does not consist of the abundance of things which he possesseth” (Luke 12:15). How has mankind gotten so far off course? When a man reaches the point of retirement and he has it “**all**” (all things pertaining to his/her physical needs), would you say they are successful? The world would laud his success, but Christ calls him a “**fool.**” Why? Because the physical things of this world are not most important! Christ said, “For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matt. 16:26).

The life of Solomon shows the vanity of worldly endeavors. Solomon had everything, tried everything, and was the wisest man to ever live. If you had everything, would you think you had made it? To answer the question, “What is the purpose of life?,” he left no stone unturned. Look at what he did in the book of Ecclesiastes:

1. He tried labor (Eccl. 1:3).
2. He gave his heart to wisdom (1:13).
3. He experienced everything (1:14).
4. He gave his life to pleasure (2:1)
5. He tried laughter (2:2).
6. He tried wine (2:3).
7. He experimented with great works (2:4-6).
8. He got servants and maidens (2:7).
9. He obtained great wealth (2:8).
10. He simply became “**great**” (2:9).

Now, if this was your life, what would you think? Would you say, “I have it made”? Look at the conclusion at

which Solomon arrived: "Then said I in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart, that this also is vanity" (2:15).

And what was the result of having it "all"? Solomon said, "Therefore **I hated life**; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit" (2:17, emp. mine, RH). I hear people say all the time, "**I hate my life!**" It is because you are looking for the answer for all of the questions to **life** in all of the wrong places. Most people are under the mistaken idea that, if they "had it all," then they would be happy. Sadly, we would probably arrive at the same conclusion of Solomon: "**I hate my life!**" We would probably hear the same words which Christ said: "Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee" (Luke 12:20). If we put all our confidence and trust in riches, what a fool we are!

The Statement Of The Parable (Luke 12:15-21)

As we look at this parable, how do we apply the principles that are contained therein? The first thing that we can see is the **warning** given unto us about covetousness. Christ tells us to "Take heed and beware of covetousness" (Luke 12:15). Covetousness is "lit., a desire to have more (**pleon**, more, **echo**, to have), always in a bad sense; in Luke 12:15 used of material possessions."⁷ It has always been the case that, when man trusts in riches, he forsakes God: "Then said Jesus unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:23). We are cautioned not to love the world:

Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the

eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever (1 John 2:15-17).

As Christians, we should be more concerned with laying up treasures in heaven:

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also (Matt. 6:19-21).

As someone once told me, “You can send your treasures on, but you can’t take them with you!” How true this is! How tragic it is when we lose sight of the big picture, which is to do everything we need to do to make it to heaven, and we turn our attention to worldly things! Do not be deceived by Satan to think that earthly riches are remotely as important as spiritual matters. Paul tells us, “If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth” (Col. 3:1-2). To what do you have your mind attuned?

The second application that we should see in this parable is the **worldly dilemma**. What are these worldly dilemmas? First, you can see that this rich fool could only see his “**self worth**.” Twelve times in verses 17-19, he points to the reason for his success as, “I, my, and thine!” The rich fool, like others before him, had forgotten that all things come from God. Nebuchadnezzar learned this lesson the hard way. He said look at what “I” have done (Dan. 4:30). God wanted to teach him the lesson “that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to

whomsoever he will” (4:32). So Nebuchadnezzar was “driven from men and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagles’ feathers, and his nails like birds’ claws” (4:33). After Nebuchadnezzar had this sobering lesson, he came to the truth about God and said:

I blessed the most High, and I praised and honoured him that liveth for ever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation (4:34).

Man is not going to save himself on his own merits:

O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps (Jer 10:23).

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast (Eph 2:8-9).

These passages do not eliminate man’s responsibility; they simply make us aware of the fact that, without God’s grace and mercy, no one would be saved (Tit. 2:11-12; Eph. 2:4-5).

The second dilemma we must face is that our **soul will be required**. Death is coming to each and everyone of us: “And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment” (Heb. 9:27). Mankind tries everything it knows to overcome death, but it is not possible. The truth is that death is coming:

For we must needs die, and are as water spilt on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again; neither doth God respect any person: yet doth he devise means, that his banished be not expelled from him (2 Sam. 14:14).

For I know that thou wilt bring me to death, and to the house appointed for all living (Job 30:23).

There is no man that hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit; neither hath he power in the day of death: and there is no discharge in that war; neither shall wickedness deliver those that are given to it (Eccl. 8:8).

Seeing that all are going to die, there is only one thing that anyone can do: “prepare to meet thy God” (Amos 4:12). Christ tells us, “I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work” (John 9:4). And when we prepare for death, then the sting of death is taken away:

So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:54-57).

If we fail to heed this warning, then this dilemma will cost us our soul.

The next worldly dilemma involves **spiritual examination**. If Christ said, “Thou fool” (Luke 12:20), of this one who was placing his emphasis on worldly matters, what would He say of us today? It seems as if man thinks that he is not going to have to answer for what he has done. This is right the opposite of what the Bible teaches:

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad (2 Cor. 5:10).

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring

every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil (Eccl. 12:13-14).

So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God (Rom 14:12).

This spiritual examination is going to be done according to the standard of God's Word:

And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:12-15).

He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day (John 12:48).

The Bible tells us that Judgment Day is going to be a separating of the righteous from the wicked:

When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left (Matt. 25:31-33).

The dilemma that you and I face is, when God examines us, will we be considered wise or foolish?

Then, there is one more worldly dilemma which we must face. For those who have spent all their life amassing great fortunes, they must face the **sober reality of possessions**. When they are dead, they will have no control over those possessions for which they have worked so hard:

Wilt thou set thine eyes upon that which is not?
for riches certainly make themselves wings; they
fly away as an eagle toward heaven (Prov. 23:5).

For he seeth that wise men die, likewise the fool
and the brutish person perish, and leave their
wealth to others (Psm. 49:10).

Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken
under the sun: because I should leave it unto
the man that shall be after me (Eccl. 2:18).

As the partridge sitteth on eggs, and hatcheth
them not; so he that getteth riches, and not by
right, shall leave them in the midst of his days,
and at his end shall be a fool (Jer. 17:11).

Paul put it this way, “For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out” (1 Tim. 6:7). Now you can spend your entire life putting all of your emphasis on material things, but, in the end, you will only give them to someone else. You can be assured that your children will spend it on whatever they want, even if you will not. You will not be here to tell them what they can or cannot do with it. Is it not foolish to spend all of your time on something that you can never really control? In the end, our possessions will be left to someone!

The third application that we see in this parable is what true **wisdom** really is. True wisdom is represented as the one who is “rich toward God” (Luke 12:21). The contrast is between the one who has amassed great fortunes but has left God out of his/her life. Christ said,

“For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matt. 16:26). John alludes to the fact that men can be mistaken in whether they are truly rich:

Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see (Rev. 3:17-18).

I find it interesting that Christ had counseled them on true riches, even to buy true riches, and they could not see it. They could see no need. Are we blinded to the truth about true riches? Paul talks about “the unsearchable riches of Christ” (Eph. 3:8). It is these riches which make us truly rich. They will give us homes that money cannot buy. They will give us hope that possessions cannot assure. They will give us happiness which cannot be found anywhere else. This is why Christ tells us to:

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also (Matt 6:19-21).

The question has to be asked and answered: “Are you a fool, or are you one who knows true wisdom?” Be assured that your eternal destiny depends on whether or not you are a fool!

Endnotes

- 1 W. E. Vine, **Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words** (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1966), #3850.
- 2 Paul T. Butler, **Bible Study Textbook Series: The Gospel of Luke** (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1981), p. 265.
- 3 H. Leo Boles, **A Commentary on the Gospel According to Luke** (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1974), p. 253.
- 4 Jimmy Clark, "The Answers of the Saviour," **Luke**, ed. William Cline, Firm Foundation Lectureship (Austin: Firm Foundation, 1988), pp. 307-308.
- 5 Ibid, p. 301.
- 6 James Burton Coffman, **Commentary on Luke** (Austin: Firm Foundation, 1977), p. 265.
- 7 Vine, #4124.

CHAPTER 21

The Parable Of The Chief Seats

Lonnie Smith

Lesson Text

And He put forth a parable to those which were bidden, when He marked how they chose out the chief rooms; saying unto them, When thou art bidden of any man to a wedding, sit not down in the highest room; lest a more honourable man than thou be bidden of him; And he that bade thee and him come and say to thee, Give this man place; and thou begin with shame to take the lowest room. But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest room; that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee. For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted (Luke 14:7-11).

Introduction

THE PARABLE OF THE Chief Seats is one of the lessons Jesus taught on humility. The principle He taught there was also found in Proverbs 25:6-7, in reference to positions of importance within the king's court:

Put not forth thyself in the presence of the king, and stand not in the place of great men: For better it is that it be said unto thee, Come up hither; than that thou shouldest be put

lower in the presence of the prince whom thine eyes have seen (Prov. 25:6-7).

The Jews in Jesus' day struggled with the same weakness we face today, seeking prominent positions and chief seats for ourselves. The basis of Jesus' teaching on humility was pertaining to the kingdom of God. Importance in the kingdom of God was not based on a person's status and high position, but his service to God.

Throughout the New Testament we see four key concepts which help us to understand the mind of God more clearly on the subject of humility. First of all, though the Son of Man came to earth without worldly riches and power, God exalted Him to His right hand. Second, entrance into the kingdom of God will not be based on the superficial status of men, but on the attitude and obedience of a man's heart. Third, Jesus taught His disciples that true greatness would be found through service. Finally, His message to the church today is that the church must have the mind of Christ and esteem others better than themselves.

Jesus was invited to the house of one of the chief Pharisees to eat on the Sabbath day. Luke 14:1 says that "they watched Him." Jesus took advantage of their curiosity of Him by teaching them a parable on humility in Luke 14:7. In Luke 14:8, Jesus reminded them of the appropriate way to act when invited to a wedding feast. He observed how the guests scrambled to sit in the highest seat. It was a tradition to have the dining table already set for those who were invited. The places at the table were reserved and not meant for just anybody. It would have been humiliating for them to be asked by the host to step down to a lower seat: "And he that bade thee and him come and say to thee, Give **this man place**; and thou begin with shame to take the **lowest room**" (14:9, emp. mine throughout, LS).

Jesus then showed them, in Luke 14:10, what happened to the guest who took for himself the lowest seat:

But when thou art bidden, **go and sit down in the lowest room**; that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, **Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them** that sit at meat with thee.

Discussion

Jesus, Our Example Of Humility

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:5-11).

Jesus emptied Himself. Jesus came to earth and was born in the lowest of circumstances. He was from a low-income area. He did not wear the best clothes, nor did He attend the best schools. In Philippians 2:7-8, the Bible gives us insight into Jesus' purpose; He came not to be placed in the highest position here on earth, but to serve. Jesus' service was not only demonstrated to man by His good works, as we see in Acts 10:38, but also by His death on the cross as described by Paul: "He humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even the death of the cross." After Jesus died on the cross, God exalted Him and gave

Him a name which was above every name. Jesus' example embodied what He taught in His parable of the chief seats: He humbled Himself and was exalted by God.

When Jesus washed His disciples' feet, as described in John 13, His purpose was to show them an example of service and illustrate what God would do for man; He humbled himself when He washed their feet and when He died for man on the cross. Jesus' disciples were twelve prideful men, and He felt a sense of urgency to impress upon them the importance of humility of heart:

Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him. If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them (13:13-17).

Jesus' Teachings On Humility

At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18:1-4).

Jesus' disciples were influenced by social and religious leaders of that day who sought after status and prestige, who wished to be seen of men. In His lesson about children, Jesus again took the opportunity to teach them that the kingdom of heaven is not based on status or rank, but upon humility. Today, not only in the business world,

but also in the church, many Christians seek prominent positions of authority and status. It is easy to get caught up in the things of this world and the importance the world places on being seen by others and doing things to be seen of men, rather than to truly serve God. Many people have left the church today because of its lack of popularity. The difficulty the church is experiencing today in finding godly men to preach and lead congregations is seen as some men turn away from smaller works, with many needs and not much glory, to find higher positions with money and status or lead the church using principles of the world and not those patterned after Christ:

But they held their peace: for by the way they had disputed among themselves, who should be the greatest. And he sat down, and called the twelve, and saith unto them, If any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and servant of all (Mark 9:34-35).

Again, the disciples questioned who was the greatest. Jesus taught them that if any desired to be first, that he should be last of all and servant of all. Putting oneself last and being a servant are signs of humility:

Then came to him the mother of Zebedee's children with her sons, worshipping him, and desiring a certain thing of him. And he said unto her, What wilt thou? She saith unto him, Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on the left, in thy kingdom. But Jesus answered and said, Ye know not what ye ask. Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? They say unto him, We are able. And he saith unto them, Ye shall drink indeed of my cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with: but to sit on my right hand, and on my left, is not mine to give, but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared of my Father. And when the

ten heard it, they were moved with indignation against the two brethren (Matt. 20:20-24).

Here, ten of the disciples were upset because they were angry that James and John were seeking prominent positions in the kingdom of God:

But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many (20:25-28).

With two of His disciples seeking power and the others' resentment becoming a problem, Jesus explained that the princes of the Gentiles seek dominion and authority, but "whosoever would be great among you, let him be your minister; and whosoever would be chief among you, let him be your servant." Jesus then explained why He came: "not to be ministered unto, but to minister."

Humility Seeks

Humility seeks not the individual's will, but God's will. In Mark 14:36, Jesus prayed to the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane: "And he said, Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee; take away this cup from me: nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt." During a moment of agonizing grief and knowing that His decision would cause Him to be separated from the Father for a time, Jesus accepted the Father's will. Humility does not seek to place personal feelings and opinions above the will of God. In his letter to the church at Philippi, the Apostle Paul expressed his concern about most workers he might

have sent to help them: “For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ’s” (Phil. 2:21). Jesus clearly stated the importance of seeking the will of God in Matthew 6:33: “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.”

In the Old Testament, King Uzziah was an example of one who was lifted up with pride and did not seek the will of God, but did his own will. As we find in 2 Chronicles 26:16:

But when he (Uzziah, LS) was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction; for he transgressed against the Lord, his God, and went into the temple of the Lord to burn incense upon the altar of incense.

God punished Uzziah with leprosy, which cut him off from his people until the day of his death:

And Azariah the chief priest, and all the priests, looked upon him, and, behold, he was leprous in his forehead, and they thrust him out from thence; yea, himself hastened also to go out, because the Lord had smitten him. And Uzziah the king was a leper unto the day of his death, and dwelt in a several house, being a leper; for he was cut off from the house of the Lord: and Jotham his son was over the king’s house, judging the people of the land (26:20-21).

In contrast, during the same year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah saw the Lord in a vision, sitting upon a throne:

In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And

one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory (Isa. 6:1-3).

In Isaiah 6:5, after his vision of the Lord, Isaiah saw himself as a man who was undone and he was moved to humility because of the Lord's holiness. It was at that point, when Isaiah offered himself in service to God:

Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged. Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me (6:5-8).

Humility seeks not dominance over man, but to be a servant to man. As was mentioned earlier in Matthew 20:26-28, Jesus emphasized this to His disciples when they got caught up in power struggles among themselves. Paul wrote in his second letter to the church in Corinth about the role of Christians in serving God through service to others: "For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor. 4:5). Seeking power and authority over others was not only a common struggle many Christians faced in Jesus' day and in the early church but is common in the church today. Humbling ourselves in service to others is a primary requirement for leadership in God's plan.

Humility seeks not self-exaltation, but to glorify God. Jesus first taught concerning self-exaltation in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:1-18. In this passage,

Jesus used three situations: giving of alms, prayer, and fasting. He states in verse one that if they would do these things to be seen of men, they have their reward: "Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven." In Galatians 1:10, Paul stated, "For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ." Preachers must guard their actions and check their motives for preaching, writing, and campaigning. All should be done to give God the glory, rather than ourselves:

Thus saith the Lord, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the Lord which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the Lord (Jer. 9:23-24).

In Jeremiah 9:23-24, Jeremiah gives us three areas in which men glorify themselves: wisdom, authority, and riches. When it comes to wisdom, we often find in the world that some men try to exalt their own wisdom by obtaining advanced degrees, but, for a Gospel preacher, training and higher learning should be for the glory of God, to serve others, and to equip ourselves, not to glorify ourselves. Paul urges us to put away the wisdom of this world and seek that wisdom which comes from God in 1 Corinthians 3:18. Authority should be used to govern or to lead others, but not as an opportunity for abuse of power or for condescension toward others. In 1 Thessalonians 2:6-7, Paul says:

Nor of men sought we glory, neither of you, nor yet of others, when we might have been

burdensome, as the apostles of Christ, but we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherishes her children.

Just as Jeremiah had warned his generation against glorying in riches, in Jesus' day, the Pharisees based their power on their riches, and the philosophy of that day was that the rich had more power. Paul, in 1 Timothy 6:17, tells Timothy, "Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy." Jeremiah, after mentioning these three ways in which men exalt themselves, goes on to tell us what men should put their glory in. To understand and know God; such glory pleases God.

In the New Testament, we see that Paul's glory was in the cross, rather than himself, and Paul is a good example of one who had the intellect, authority, and riches, but his glory was in the cross of Christ. Everything we do should be to the glory of God. 1 Corinthians 10:31 states, "Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God."

Why Should We Strive For Humility?

We strive for humility because it is pleasing to God. In Isaiah 66:1-2, God provided for the children of Israel to build the temple upon their return from a period of exile in Babylon, but He emphasized, in verse two, those things that were most important to Him:

Thus saith the Lord, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that ye build unto me? and where is the place of my rest? For all those things hath mine hand made, and all those things have been, saith the Lord: but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word (Isa. 66:1-2).

God reminds them that what pleases Him is not the size of the temple, the burnt offerings and sacrifices. He lists three things that are pleasing to God. In this context, “poor” is used to mean humble. The second characteristic Isaiah mentions here, is a “contrite spirit,” which is a penitent heart. The third characteristic is he who “trembles at God’s word.” Here is a person who accepts the authority of God’s Word; one who takes the Word of God seriously; one who meditates on the Word of God; one who neither goes to the right nor the left. In 1 Peter 5:5-6, Peter counsels:

Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time.

Peter references the Parable of the Chief Seats, found in Luke 14:7-11, in which Jesus taught this parable as a principle of life, to be practiced daily.

We strive for humility because it conforms to the image of Christ. In Romans 8:29, we see it was God’s eternal purpose that we would be conformed to the eternal image of Christ: “For whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.” In studying the life of Christ, and His teachings, humility is at the forefront of His life. Christianity is a life of service.

Application To The Christian Life

Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus (Phil. 2:3-5).

The first principle of humility toward others is found in esteeming others better than yourself. The world's gospel is to look out for number one. We live in a dog-eat dog-world and the motivation of this world is to seek intellect, power, and riches or material gain. Paul urges us in Romans 12:16, "Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits." The Christian life is the opposite of the world's life because God has promised that, if we seek Him first and His righteousness, He will give us the things we need. There is no place for competition in the Lord's church. Our greatest enemy is Satan himself. In order for Christians to work together, for the purpose of glorifying God and preaching the Gospel, we must esteem others better than ourselves.

Christians should not judge others on the basis of their cars, homes, jobs, but we should treat each other with high esteem because Christ died for us. We have a bond in Christ that no material things can compare with, and we have a hope in Christ that no material things can compare with. In 1 Corinthians 12:22-26, we have a principle that Paul teaches that every member of the body is necessary and we should treat each member with honor; we should have the same care one for another. As we have the same care for one another, so also should we look out for others.

Galatians 6 gives us several principles to use in looking out for others. In Galatians 6:1, when we are restoring a brother, we have to consider ourselves, lest we be tempted. We are to be meek. Galatians 6:2 teaches that we are to bear one another's burdens and carry their load when the burden is heavy. We also need to share what we have with one another. We find the same principle in Acts 2:45-46, where Luke, in describing the Christians' attitudes toward each other, recorded:

And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart.

The early church had all things in common when they sold their possessions and goods and gave to every man as he had need. We find another principle in Galatians 6:10, where we are admonished to do good unto all men as it is part of our Christian walk, but we have a special responsibility to one another as part of the household of faith.

Conclusion

“For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted” (Luke 14:11).

The Parable of the Chief Seats concludes that the Christian who humbles him/herself will be exalted by God (Luke 14:11). There are many teachings of Jesus concerning humility within the New Testament. This should cause us to realize the importance of our attitudes and our behavior. The church must strive to be humble like her Lord, because it will glorify Him (1 Cor. 10:31).

CHAPTER 22

The Parable Of The Friend In Need

Barry Gilreath, Jr.

Introduction

THERE IS NO DOUBT about it. Jesus Christ was the Master Teacher. He always knew what to say and exactly how to say it. His marvelous instructive ability prompted Nicodemus to confess that truly He was a teacher come from God (John 3:1-2). Matthew wrote, “And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine: For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Matt. 7:28-29).

The Lord, as any great teacher, often used various approaches to impart His saving message. Whether He was presenting His message in a straightforward didactic form, as in the beatitudes, or simply turning a question upon the inquisitor to reveal their erroneous suppositions (John 8:1-11), the Lord always knew how to communicate His message effectively. One communicative approach that the Lord sometimes used was to present His truths through parables. A parable can be defined in its basic meaning as an earthly story with a heavenly message. Using such an approach, the Lord was able to draw honest hearts unto heavenly truths, while yet hiding God’s jewels of Truth from those who would abuse them (Matt. 13:13-16).

The parable of the friend in need was presented by the Master Teacher to reveal truths regarding prayer. It was given to the disciples following the delivery of the Lord's model prayer. The parable was made known in connection with the disciples' request for Jesus to teach them how to pray. There was obviously something about the Lord and His prayers that astounded and interested His disciples. After providing a basic example and structure for acceptable prayer, the Lord offered a common story that contained a bit of humor in it. Most people can personally relate to the parable that Jesus told on that day, having probably played one or more of the characters at some point in time in their life's experiences.

Luke is the only writer to reveal any parable(s) of the Lord that dealt **specifically** with the subject of prayer. Luke 18:1ff is the only other parable dealing **specifically** with the subject of prayer. For our discussion in this lecture, we will examine the assigned text of Luke 11:5-8. Sometimes this story is described as the parable of the friend in need. More accurately, it could be described as the parable of three friends in need. There was the friend in need of a night's stay while passing through town. There was the friend who was in need of the basic means of hospitality for his unexpected guest. There was the friend in need of a good night's rest. For sake of organization the outline of this lecture will be divided into five main sections each beginning with the letter "R." The sub-points will also be noted by the letter "R."

Revelation Of An Inconvenient Request (v. 5)

"And he said unto them, Which of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say unto him, Friend, lend me three loaves."

The Lord begins His instructive illustration by presenting His audience with a brief **recapitulation** of

an unfolding dilemma. The recapitulation, or general summary of the scene, was intended to catch the attention of the listening audience. Once He had their attention, the Truth could be effectively imparted. Speech instructors often emphasize the importance of the first and last few minutes of any public presentation. The Lord understood this and responded masterfully. Curiosity would have prompted the listeners to consider carefully the unfolding events and the later application that the Lord would make.

Basically, the Lord's general summary is that a friend in need went to the home of his friend at a very late hour of the night. According to the Jewish time clock, the day officially ended at 6:00 p.m. The hour that the needy friend chose was one that was very late by most people's standards. Not surprising, the man was retired to his sleeping quarters for the evening.

It is in this first passage that we are introduced to two of the three main characters in the parable. Christ used the affectionate term "friend" to inform the audience of their **relationship**. These two individuals would have had a common familiarity with and respect for one another. If we had known these two characters in real life, they would have been much like two friends today. Perhaps they might have worked together, fished together, or just simply enjoyed each other's company. For purposes of the Lord's parable, we are to understand that their relationship was friendly (Prov. 18:24).

Obviously, there was some extraordinary circumstance that would have prompted one to call upon a companion at such a late hour. Fortunately, real friends "loveth at all times" (Prov. 17:17), even at midnight, but not quite as much as during the daylight hours, as we will soon see. Yet the friend in need saw his sleeping friend as the **remedy** to the dilemma that is still not yet fully revealed to the modern reader of the parable.

In the last portion of the verse, the friend makes known his unusual **request**. The request is for rations of bread. To ask a friend for such a small petition is certainly not unusual in any fashion. Most have probably called upon a friend to borrow an egg, sugar, even a loaf of bread, as such a need would arise. However, what makes this request unusual is the time in which the request was made—in the middle of the night. Why would one trouble a sleeping friend over bread at such an awkward hour?

Reasoning For The Unusual Request (v. 6)

“For a friend of mine in his journey is come to me, and I have nothing to set before him?”

The Lord continues His parable by informing His disciples of the reasoning behind such strange activity in the middle of the night. The **reception** of an unexpected visitor has posed a problem for the friend in need. He was unprepared and unable to take care of the common acts of hospitality that one might expect to bestow upon beloved friends who are guests in one’s home. Therefore, the needy friend presents his embarrassing dilemma to his sleeping friend to justify the inconvenient petition.

Within his petition one can easily see his **regret** for not being able to provide the basic and common acts of courtesy of the day. Hospitality in most cultures is of extreme importance, yes, even in the middle of the night. It is anticipated and hoped that the sleeping friend will show himself friendly and take care of the problem by supplying his friend’s need of bread rations.

Response To The Untimely Request (v. 7)

“And he from within shall answer and say, Trouble me not: the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give thee.”

The sharp response and **resistance** of the sleeping friend was not exactly what the friend in need had desired. The sleeping friend firmly informed the caller of the night that he did not want to be troubled. A casual reading of the text might prompt some to sarcastically think, “some friend the sleeping man is,” but in all probability most people would respond in a similar fashion under similar circumstances.

The terse response of the sleeping man has prompted some to be perplexed by the parabolic meaning, since the sleeping friend represents God in the story. Yet one mistake that is common in Bible interpretation is to draw more from a passage than was intended by the original author. One should no more conclude that God is resistant to helping His children in need than one should conclude that God is asleep during the night hours. Neither is this the point of the Lord. The larger context must be taken into consideration. God wants us to understand that He wants His children to be persistent in their petitions, not that He is unreceptive to them.

The passage also presents the **rationale** for the initial denial of assistance. Two specific reasons for not complying with the request are given by the friend who has retired for the night: 1) The door is shut. To open the door would involve effort that the sleeping friend is not yet convinced is necessary at that hour of the night; 2) The children are asleep in the bed with their father. For the sleeping friend to arise from the bed would probably mean the awakening also of his children. Any parent can appreciate this reasoning, since children are often difficult to put into bed, and disturbances during the middle of the night make the process even more difficult the second time around. With so many obstacles in the way, the sleepy friend insists that he not be bothered—perhaps in the morning, on another day, at an earlier hour, but not in the

middle of the night! Those who have had similar experiences can relate to the proverbial writer who wrote, “He that blesseth his friend with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, it shall be counted a curse to him” (Prov. 27:14).

Rewarding Of The Repeated Request (v. 8)

“I say unto you, Though he will not rise and give him, because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him as many as he needeth.”

In the final passage of this parable, we find that persistence pays off. The petitioning friend is described as being in a state of “importunity.” Webster defines “importune” as “to press or urge with troublesome persistence.” The friend in need was **repetitive** in his request. He would not give up; and so what the sleeping friend would not do because of their friendship, he did do because of the repetitive petitioning of his persistent friend.

The final parabolic thread in the Lord’s garment of truth is manifest in the eventual **receiving** of the petitioned request. The sleeping friend finally arose from his bed and was eventually willing to give to his friend whatever he requested. Despite the inconveniences, the obstacles, or the difficulties granting the request would have imposed upon the petitioned friend, it was far easier to provide the request in the long run than to have to deal with the consequences of not doing so. Thus the friend in need was ultimately rewarded for his persistent pleading. The sleeping friend could finally get back to his night’s rest, and the sojourning friend would indeed receive the common courtesy of bread when he awoke.

Ramifications Of The Parabolic Request

There are a number of lessons that can be gained from the Lord’s parable regarding prayer. First, we learn

that we have a **responsibility** to pray. This is not only implied by the disciple's question, but also by the Lord's response. If the Lord did not believe that this was an obligation of man, the parable would never have been uttered. Indeed the parable not only teaches us of the obligation to pray but the obligation to pray quite often. One of the shortest verses in the Bible exhorts us to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17). In the only other parable dealing specifically with prayer, we read, "And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray and not to faint" (Luke 18:1). Communication is vital in every strong relationship. The Lord communicates with us today through His Word. We are to communicate with Him through the avenue of prayer that He has made available to us by means of His sacrifice. The Hebrews writer wrote, "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb 4:16). The Lord, in His parable of the friend in need, affirmed the obligation that we have to pray to our Father above.

The parable also informs us of some specific **requirements** in prayer. The story of the Master teaches us several lessons:

1. **Our prayers must be direct.** The friend in need knew who could help him with his dilemma. He did not go up and down the street calling for just anyone to come out into the streets to assist him. He went directly to the householder, his dear friend, and petitioned him alone.

2. **Our prayers must be sincere.** Prayer by its very nature must come from the heart to be acceptable to God. Insincerity in our interaction with God will not be tolerated (Matt. 6:5-8). The friend in need was very sincere in his petition.

3. **Our prayers must be persistent.** This is the major emphasis and purpose of the parable. James, the

Lord's brother, no doubt heard Jesus pray many times in His life. He later wrote, "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (Jas. 5:16). James had certainly seen that truth fulfilled in his brother's and Savior's life. Often, our heart's desires might be granted from our Father, if we would just be more persistent in our requests. The lack of persistence in our prayers indicates one of three possibilities. Either we do not understand the teaching of Scripture regarding persistence, we do not trust the Lord to grant our requests, or the request we initially asked for was not really all that important to us anyway. One thing is for sure. The parable of the friend in need teaches us to be direct, sincere, and persistent.

In this parable of the Lord we also learn that God's children can always **rely** upon Him to provide their every need in life. God is the householder, and we are His friends in need. Although the householder was fast asleep, God never sleeps or slumbers. This was the ridicule that Elijah hurled towards the false prophets of Baal in regard to their god's inactivity (1 Kings 18:27). However, Jehovah God, the Maker and Ruler of all things, is ever present and always willing to grant our every need (Psm. 139:1-12; 37:25; 2 Cor. 9:11-12). This is why James describes God as a giving God (Jas. 1:5). If sincere, direct, and persistent petitioning eventually prompted a sleeping and irritated man to arise and grant an untimely and inconvenient request, how much more will direct, sincere, and persistent prayer prevail with a God Who never sleeps, loves us, and is eager to grant our every need in life!

Lastly, we learn that God is a never-ending **reservoir** of blessings. The needy friend knew that the householder was yet able to supply his need. However, there certainly would have been a limit to what his earthly friend could have supplied. Yet with God it is not true. He is the God

Who can take five loaves and two fishes, feed everyone, and still have an abundance left. When the disciples came to the Lord on that occasion, Andrew said, "There is a lad here, which hath five barley loaves, and two small fishes: but what are they among so many?" (John 6:9). More accurately, Andrew should have said, "What a small task amongst One so great." Yet the Lord demonstrated that He can do far above our greatest expectations. Though earthly reservoirs will eventually go dry, God's reservoir will never be emptied. In times of trial and heartache, tribulation and grief, or famine and devastation, God can and will supply our every need.

Conclusion

The parable is clear. Its message is resounding. Do not miss it, or you will miss out on God's bottomless reservoir of blessings. You must:

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened (Luke 11:9-10).

CHAPTER 23

The Parable Of The Great Supper

Sean Hochdorf

Introduction

IT IS A GREAT honor to be one of the speakers for this great lectureship. Even more so it is a great privilege to work with such a fine congregation. I have benefited greatly by being able to work alongside B. J. and have come to appreciate his tireless efforts in editing the lectureship book. The good that will come from such a volume as this will only be known in eternity. I also rejoice that I am able to work under the oversight of the Southaven elders. These are great men who have the vision and knowledge of the Word of God to shepherd the flock effectively.

The parable of the great supper is one in which many lessons can be learned, both for the faithful child of God and those who have not yet made the great confession and put our Lord on in baptism.

Context Of Luke 14:15-24

On the Sabbath day the Lord entered into one of the chief Pharisees' house to participate in a meal (Luke 14:1). During the meal a man with dropsy came into the meeting area. Dropsy was a disease which seems to have been produced by an accumulation of water under the skin in various parts of the body, often the results of a previous

disease, generally incurable,¹ and very painful.² This passage is the only place the word “dropsy” occurs. The Lord, knowing the hearts of the Pharisees, poses the question “Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath day?” (14:3). It is interesting that the text mentions both the lawyers and the Pharisees. These two groups were familiar with the Law of Moses, and they knew that what Jesus was doing was not against the Law. Therefore they held their peace. The Lord then makes it clear that, if it were okay to pull a donkey or an ox out of the pit on the sabbath, then certainly it is lawful to heal a human being. Again, the Pharisees held their peace (14:5-6). After these events the Lord takes note of how the Pharisees are jockeying for position at the feast. The phrase “chief rooms” in verse 7 does not refer to rooms or chambers but rather to the higher places at the table³:

The **triclinia**, or Grecian table, then in use had three sections which were placed together so as to form a flat-bottomed letter U. The space enclosed by the table was not occupied. It was left vacant that the servants might enter it and attend to the wants of the guests who reclined around the outer margin of the table. The central seat of each of these three sections was deemed a place of honor. This struggle for precedence was a small ambition, but many of the ambitions of our day are equally small.⁴

This appears to have been a common occurrence among the Pharisees (Matt. 23:6). Upon noticing this desire for place and recognition, the Lord sets forth a parable, the parable of the chief seats as it has been called, to those present. For fear of repeating another author’s lecture, we briefly summarize this parable thusly. The Lord here refers to the conduct of those who are invited to the feast. They should not seek their selfish ways, but rather they should humble themselves and, in so doing, they would be exalted

(Luke 14:10-11). This thought is further continued in verses 12-14. Jesus here states that, when one sets a feast, it should not be with the motive of being recompensed by his guests, but rather he should “call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: And thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just” (14:13-14). These things being said, the stage is now set for the parable of the Great Supper.

The Parable Of The Great Supper (Luke 14:15-24)

“And when one of them that sat at meat with him heard these things, he said unto him, Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God” (Luke 14:15). This statement was no doubt brought about from this Pharisee’s misunderstanding of the words just spoken by the Lord. This Jew was thinking of a material kingdom and not a spiritual one. Because of his position as a Pharisee, he yearned for the day that the kingdom would come and he could bask in its glory. However, he was very wrong. Thus, Jesus addressed this mistaken Pharisee with the parable of the great supper:

Then said he unto him, A certain man made a great supper, and bade many: And sent his servant at supper time to say to them that were bidden, Come; for all things are now ready (14:16-17).

The word “great” here means a large number of people. One honors others by inviting them to share his hospitality. Much expense and work is required when many are invited.⁵ There seems to be two dominant opinions as to who the “certain man” and the “servant” represent. Some would have the “certain man” representing God the Father. This view is based on passages such as Isaiah 25:6-7:

And in this mountain shall the Lord of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined. And he will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations.

Those who believe that the “certain man” is God believe that the “servant” represents Jesus. This is based on: 1) The fact that the word servant is singular; and 2) Passages such as Philippians 2:5-8:

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

Trench has the following words concerning this matter:

Some interpreters, perhaps the larger number, see in the servant who reminded the guests that the feast was ready, and bade them to enter into the enjoyment of good things, not now far off but near, the Evangelists and Apostles; but this interpretation, which I also adopted once, does not, I must own, now please me so well as the other, which sees in him not any series or company of the servants of the Heavenly King, but one and one only; that One being no less than the great Apostle and High Priest of our profession Himself, who, being in the form of God, yet took upon Him the form of a servant, and as such, according to the prophecies of Him which went before, above all in the later Isaiah, accomplished his Father's will upon earth. In the parable of the Barren Fig-tree the Son assumes exactly the same subordinate position and functions (Luke xiii. 7-8) as would, according to this distribution, of parts, be ascribed to Him here.⁶

Others would have the “certain man” being Jesus and the “servant” being either the apostles, John the Baptist, or both. In support of this, several passages are presented to include:

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Matt 11:28-30).

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe (John 1:6-7).

Indeed there are good arguments for both sides, and this writer readily admits that he is undecided at the time of this writing. However, regardless of what opinion one may hold to, damage is not done to the meaning of the parable. The fact of the matter is that God the Father and God the Son have bidden all men to enter the kingdom. They are one in purpose and one in desire. Jesus said, “I and my Father are one” (John 10:30). The message of the servant is clear: “Come; for all things are now ready” (Luke 14:17). The preparation for the kingdom was not something that happened overnight, but rather it had been in the mind of God for eternity (Eph. 3:11). Then, the fulness of time (Gal. 4:4) came, and it was time for “the God of heaven (to) set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed” (Dan. 2:44). This kingdom, unlike the kingdom this Pharisee had in mind, includes **all** nations (Isa. 2:2; Dan. 7:14):

And they all with one consent began to make excuse. The first said unto him, I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it: I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove

them: I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come (Luke 14:18-20).

Boles notes that the word “consent” is not in the original but rather the idea is that they all had the same attitude or spirit.⁷ There are several things that can be seen about the excuses that were offered. First, one can see that the guests had made their appointments, either for business or pleasure, without the least regard for the hour of the banquet. Second, those who were invited did not value the great honor bestowed upon them for receiving such an invitation. Third, they did not value the friendship of their host.

Even worse is an examination of the excuses offered. McGarvey said: “the excuses progress in disrespect, for the first excuse is on the ground of necessity, the second simply offers a reason, and the third is almost impudent in its bluntness.”⁸ The first excuse was, “I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it.” One immediately wonders why someone would purchase land without first looking at it. The virtuous woman of Proverbs 31 did not do as this man did, for “She considereth a field, and buyeth it” (Prov. 31:16).⁹ The phrase “I must needs go” could also be understood as “I have necessity” or “I am obliged to go and see it.” It is possible that the man would soon go and examine a contract on the land.¹⁰ Whatever the case may be, we can learn from this that:

sinner sometimes plead that they are under a necessity to neglect the affairs of religion. The affairs of the world, they pretend, are so pressing that they cannot find time to attend to their souls. They have no time to pray, or read the Scriptures, or keep up the worship of God. In this way many lose their souls. God cannot regard such an excuse for neglecting religion with approbation. He commands us to seek first

the kingdom of God and his righteousness, nor can he approve any excuse that men may make for not doing it.¹¹

The second excuse is similar in nature to the first: “And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them: I pray thee have me excused” (Luke 14:19). A yoke means two or more animals yoked together. This excuse, as are the others, is shameful. This man should have first observed the oxen performing their duty before purchasing them and, even if he did not, he could have tried them some other time.

The third excuse offered is the most despicable of all the excuses offered: “And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come” (14:20). Notice that this man did not ask to be excused; he simply says, “I cannot come.” It was the case under the Old Law that the bridegroom could miss war due to marriage (Deut. 20:7; 24:5), but he was obligated to carry out all other aspects of daily life, including the honor of attending a feast. Coffman points out “where was there ever a bride who would not have wished to attend a feast in the home of a rich man?”¹² One cannot but help to think of the words of the Lord in Matthew 10:37-38:

He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me.

It has been said concerning these excuses that they are not as ridiculous as some have wanted to make them. From the standpoint of the carnal man, what is more important than real estate, business, and family? However, when one considers the eternity of the soul, these things quickly fade from view. Thus, we are warned not to be

hindered by the love of possessions, the affairs of business, and our social ties.¹³ It has been well said that there is another buying of a field mentioned in Scripture:

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field (Matt. 13:44).

There is also another setting of the hand to the plow: “And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62). And there is also another wedding to participate in: “For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ” (2 Cor. 11:2).¹⁴ Had these men participated in these matters, they would not have been hindered in accepting the invitation of the Lord:

and how apt a commentary the words of St. Paul supply, “But this I say, brethren, the time is short: it remaineth, that both they that have wives be as though they had none; And they that weep, as though they wept not; and they that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not; and they that buy, as though they possessed not; And they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the fashion of this world passeth away” (1 Cor 7:29-31); since it was not the having,—for they had nothing which it was not lawful for men to have,—but the unduly loving these things, which proved their hindrance, and ultimately excluded them from the feast.¹⁵

So that servant came, and shewed his lord these things. Then the master of the house being angry said to his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind (Luke 14:21).

The servant now relays the excuses made to his master. The master, realizing that all those things mentioned could have been put off to another day, was angered and highly insulted. Thus, the command is given to “Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city.” Time was of the essence. The feast was ready; there was no time to be wasted. All classes of people in the city would be included in this invitation. The rich would be out and about in the streets, and the poor would be dwelling the in lanes or alleys of the city. Emphasis is also placed concerning that class of people mentioned in verse 13: “the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind.” The maimed and the halt (lame), under the Old Law, were excluded from full participation in Jewish worship (Lev. 21:17-23; Deut. 23:1). However, in the kingdom all could freely worship God. No doubt this was one of the reasons the Ethiopian eunuch went on his way rejoicing. He was returning from worshipping in Jerusalem when Philip appeared to preach Jesus to him (Acts 8:27). As a eunuch he could not enter into the temple to worship with others, but had to remain outside (Lev. 21:20; Deut. 23:1). Now, having obeyed the Gospel, he could worship alongside his brethren, certainly an occasion for rejoicing (Psm. 122:1)! The blind were invited as well and could be assured of their guide (Matt. 15:14; John 8:12).

“And the servant said, Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room” (Luke 14:22). The servant had followed his master’s command: he had invited all those in the city to the feast. However, there is still room at the table.

What a glorious declaration is this in regard to the gospel! There yet is room. Millions have been saved, but there yet is room. Millions have been invited, and have come,...but heaven is not full. There is a banquet there which no number can

exhaust; there are fountains which no number can drink dry;...there are seats there which others may occupy....The parent may say to his children, there is yet room; the minister of the gospel may go and say to the wide world, there is yet room. The mercy of God is not exhausted; the blood of the atonement has not lost its efficacy; heaven is not full.¹⁶

“And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled” (Luke 14:23). This second invitation takes the servant outside of the city limits. It is here that the invitation is offered to the Gentiles. The Gentiles were despised by the Pharisees, and it would be an insult to be included with them. However, concerning salvation, we know that God is no respecter of persons (Acts 10:34). The word “compel” does not mean to force people to accept the invitation, although some have applied it in this way:

Long ago, Augustine used this text as a justification for religious persecution. It was used as a defense, and even as a command, to coerce people into the Christian faith. It was used as a defense for the inquisition, the thumb-screw, the rack, the threat of death and imprisonment.¹⁷

Christ has never set forth to begging or using means such as Augustine did to bring people into the kingdom. The Lord wishes to have volunteers in His service, not those forced into slavery: “The church which tolerates, encourages, and practices persecution is not the church of Christ; and no man can be of such a church without endangering his salvation.”¹⁸ Some have taken the phrase “that my house may be filled” to mean that there is a specific number of people who are chosen to occupy heaven:

These words are a definite suggestion that God intends to redeem from earth “a certain number

of souls.” “The invitation will therefore be continued, and consequently the history of our race prolonged, until that number be reached.”¹⁹

This is nothing more than the Calvinistic form of predestination. Indeed it is the case that God has predestined the plan for redeeming mankind (Eph. 1:5, 11), but man himself has not been chosen prior to his coming into being as to where he will spend eternity. How could one understand verses like “The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet 3:9), if predestination were true? Yes, God has categorically chosen who would enjoy the borders of heaven and who would spend eternity in a devil’s hell: “And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto **all them that obey him**” (Heb 5:9, emp. mine, SH).

“For I say unto you, That none of those men which were bidden shall taste of my supper” (Luke 14:24). This is not teaching that none of the Jews would be saved—those who would make excuses and reject the invitation, as the three mentioned earlier:

The invitation is full and free; but when it is rejected, and men turn wilfully away from it, God leaves them to their chosen way, and they are drowned in destruction and perdition. How important, then, is it to embrace the gospel at once; to accept the gracious invitation, and enter without delay the path that conducts to heaven!²⁰

Lessons From The Parable Of The Great Supper

There are many lessons that can be drawn from a parable such as this; however, the import of the passage centers upon the excuses that some will make to forsake

the invitation to enter into the kingdom. Therefore, the excuses that people make today to forsake the Lord's invitation will be dealt with.

There are hypocrites in the church. Indeed, this is one of the oldest excuses ever used to relieve oneself of his obligation to the Lord's church. However, one should realize that hypocrites are going to be lost (Matt. 23:1ff; 24:51), and those who are not obedient to Christ will be lost, thus causing the one forsaking the invitation to spend eternity with the hypocrite! How sad that people do not see the folly of such an excuse. There are hypocrites in the workplace, and yet one does not quit work. There are hypocrites involved in entertainment that we may enjoy and yet we continue to be entertained. Simply put, there are hypocrites in the world, and yet we do not kill ourselves to get away from them, but rather we learn to deal with this type of person. In Acts the fifth chapter, one can read of two hypocrites named Ananias and Sapphira. This husband and wife had purchased some land and conspired together that they would say they sold the land for less than they actually had in order to pocket some money and still appear as if they were giving their all. This was rank hypocrisy and they paid for their crime (Acts 5:5, 10). One should notice that Peter did not forsake the kingdom because of these hypocritical individuals, nor did any other brethren. Also, one must realize that there is a vast difference between being a hypocrite and someone making a mistake.

I am not good enough. The story is told about the famous sheriff Bufford Pusser. It is said that many times a Gospel preacher approached Mr. Pusser and pleaded with him to obey the Gospel, to which Mr. Pusser would reply something like this: "Of all the evils that I have committed there is no way the blood of Christ could ever cover me." What a sad statement to limit the blood of Christ in this fashion! The Lord said:

They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance (Matt. 9:12-13).

If only those who use excuses such as this realized that the purpose of the church is to make people good/saved through the blood of Jesus Christ! There could be no more vile and wicked persons than the ones who put an innocent Christ on a guilty man's cross, and yet our compassionate Lord said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). It is also the case that, normally, those who recognize their shortcomings make better Christians in that they realize their dependence upon the Lord and not themselves.

I am good enough already. There are those who, when confronted with the Gospel and their amenability to it, will respond that they are good enough already. After all I do not lie, steal, cheat, or murder. I am a good person, and surely no loving God would condemn me. When this type of attitude is exhibited, it is an opportune time to look at the life of Cornelius the centurion. As far as being a moral man, Cornelius ranked above many others in his day and ours as well. It is said that Cornelius: (1) was a devout man, (2) feared God with all his house, (3) gave of his means to assist people, and (4) was one who prayed to God on a continual basis (Acts 10:2). Certainly, by the world's standards, Cornelius was a good, moral man. However, as one continues in his reading of the account of Cornelius, he will find that, despite his outstanding character, he still was not saved. Peter, in rehearsing the matter to his Jewish brethren, said concerning the words the angel spoke to Cornelius, "Who shall tell thee words, whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved" (11:14). This truth stands not only for Cornelius, but for all

mankind as well. If a man wants to go to heaven, no matter how good he may be, or how much he may give, he must be in Christ (John 3:3-5). The only way to get into Christ is by putting him on in baptism (Gal. 3:27).

I cannot stay faithful. Some excuse themselves from the blessings of the kingdom by stating that they simply cannot stay faithful. However, this reasoning is rarely, if ever, used on other aspects in life. If one is sick, he does not refuse to call a doctor for fear that he might get sick again. If one is hungry, he does not refuse to eat because he might get hungry later in the day. It should be realized that God understands that we are not going to be perfect. What God does expect us to do is do our best to adhere to His Word and, when we stumble, realize that He is the **only** one that can remedy our illness (Acts 8:13-22; 1 John 1:9-2:1). It should be reassuring to the Christian that:

There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it (1 Cor. 10:13).

I still have plenty of time left. “Boast not thyself of tomorrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth” (Prov. 27:1). This statement is often made by those who are young. However, one thing that should be remembered is that young people can still die. This writer, while in high school, had a good friend whom he had spent time with one Friday evening. On Saturday afternoon, word came that this same friend, seventeen years old, had a seizure, had driven off a bridge, and was killed instantly. He was there one day and gone the next. Of a certainty, he was not prepared to meet his God. Perhaps he thought he had plenty of time left, but he did not. In confronting this

attitude, one should ask himself, “can I mark down the day I will die?” The words of the inspired James ring in the ears of those souls that have departed life, whether young or old, before obeying the Gospel:

Go to now, ye that say, Today or tomorrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away (Jas. 4:13-14).

How awful it would be to exclaim alongside the rich man, “I am tormented in this flame” (Luke 16:24).

I will be the eleventh-hour man. This excuse is often offered by the ignorant. Those who have learned just enough of the Bible sound as if they know a loophole in the Lord’s call to discipleship. The fact of the matter is that there are very few eleventh-hour men. A close examination of Matthew 20 would reveal that the “eleventh-hour man” accepted the first invitation:

And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard; and whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive (Matt. 20:6-7).

There are those today, especially in our great United States of America, who may have heard invitation upon invitation, only to refuse every opportunity to be saved.

I am too busy to become a Christian. The answer to this excuse is similar to the excuse “I still have plenty of time,” in that one is never too busy to die: “What man is he that liveth, and shall not see death? shall he deliver his soul from the hand of the grave?” (Psm. 89:48). It is a

certainty that, when one allows the affairs of this world (as seen in the parable under consideration) to crowd out God's Word, he is **too** busy and he is lost.

I want to feel saved before becoming a member of the church. The desire of man to depend solely upon his feelings has plagued man for centuries. Long ago the weeping prophet said, "O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps" (Jer. 10:23). Wise Solomon confirmed this by saying, "There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death" (Prov. 14:12). Paul stated before his obedience to the Gospel:

I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them (Acts 26:9-10).

The fact of the matter is that one should feel good because he has obeyed the Gospel and **not** believe he is saved because he feels good.

I do not know what church to join. If one would take time to study, even briefly, the Word of God it would be clear as to which church one should belong, the church of Christ. How does one become a member? Does he join as he would a country club or other social organization? How did one get into his family? He was born into it. The same is true with the Lord's church. Paul said, "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:13). Therefore, when one puts Christ on in baptism (Gal. 3:27), the Lord then adds him to the body, also called the church (Acts 2:47; 1 Cor 12:13).²¹

Conclusion

“How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him” (Heb. 2:3). How sad it is for those, both past and present, who have refused the beautiful invitation of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. It would do good for all to realize that those the Lord was addressing did not poison the food at the feast; rather, they simply neglected the invitation. May it be that all those that have the disposition of heart the Lord described as “good ground” (Matt. 13:8) will heed the invitation before it is everlasting too late:

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (11:28-30).

Endnotes

1 H. Leo Boles, **A Commentary on the Gospel According to Luke** (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1991), p. 280.

2 Albert Barnes, “The Gospels,” **Barnes Notes on the New Testament** (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1884-85), p. 94.

3 Ibid, p. 95.

4 John William McGarvey & Philip Y. Pendleton, **The Fourfold Gospel** (Bowling Green, KY: Guardian of Truth), p. 493.

5 Burt Groves, **The Gospel According to Luke Commentary** (Abilene, TX: Quality Publications, 1991), p. 157.

6 Richard Chenevix Trench, **Notes on the Parables of our Lord** (New York: D. Appleton, 1899), p. 363.

7 Boles, p. 287.

8 McGarvey and Pendleton, pp. 495-96.

9 Trench, p.365.

10 Barnes, p. 97.

11 Ibid.

12 James Burton Coffman, Bible Study Library: The New Testament on CD (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1999). The comment was made about Luke 14:18.

13 McGarvey & Pendleton, p. 496.

14 Trench, 366.

15 Ibid, p. 367.

16 Barnes, p.98.

17 Coffman, comment on Luke 14:23.

18 Adam Clarke, **Clarke's Commentary**, Volume 1 (New York: Abingdon Press), p. 455. For an interesting discussion of the type of problems that arise by forced Christianity, read the discussion on pp. 454-55.

19 Coffman, comment on Luke 14:23.

20 Barnes, p. 99.

21 Frank Young: these excuses came from typed notes I received while attending the Memphis School of Preaching. Brother Young passed away several years ago, and yet his valuable notes are still helping others preach the Gospel.

CHAPTER 24

The Parable Of The Absent Householder

Harrell Davidson

Introduction

MUCH APPRECIATION IS EXPRESSED to the elders of the Southaven congregation for continuing to maintain this fine lectureship. It is an honor to be asked to write a chapter in the book as well as give an oral presentation of the matters under consideration. Brother B. J. Clarke is a beloved brother and faithful fellow servant in the Lord. His work is well known throughout our vast brotherhood. We applaud his stand for the truth without wavering.

The Book Of Mark

Every book of the Bible is unique. Every book in the Bible is related to every other book in the Bible, with Genesis perhaps being the exception because no book precedes it. However, beginning in Exodus, we notice that Exodus could not be understood without the book of Genesis. This continues on through the entire Bible. We also need to always keep in mind that the Bible is one book. I sometimes tell my “Faithful Bible Investigators” class that the “Bible is one book with sixty-six chapters.” While each book is dependent on all the other books, each has its own characteristic.

One of the most important things in Bible study is to know the background behind and the purpose of the book

we are about to study. We need to understand the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament. All of the principles in Mark point to Pentecost. Mark would be useless if it were not for Matthew. Look at the way Matthew begins: “The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matt. 1:1). This would have no meaning if we did not have the Old Testament. This also introduces the New Testament and begins to show how these books are related to each other. For example, Matthew refers to the Old Testament one-hundred-twenty-eight times. Mark does so sixty-four times (directly or indirectly). Luke refers back ninety-six times and John forty-three times. The New Testament has more than three hundred references to the Old Testament. Christ quoted from fourteen of the thirty nine books of the Old Testament. These are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Samuel, Kings, Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Hosea, Zechariah, and Malachi. The fact of these quotations shows the connection between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Christ fulfilled the Law and the prophets.

The Old Testament is the foundation of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These are the foundation for Acts through Revelation. If you tried to study Acts without the foundation of Matthew through John, you would be lost. Acts, Romans, and all the epistles grow out of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. So Christ is the theme of both the Old Testament and the New Testament, beginning in Genesis 3:15. Sometimes I am asked why there is a need for four different records of Christ? A good question! Each gives a picture of Christ. Matthew is written to the Jews, for they were looking for a promised Messiah and a King. Matthew presents Christ as the promised King. Mark is not writing about that, because he was writing to a different people. He did not have to prove that Christ came

by way of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, and so the genealogy as given in Matthew is not necessary in Mark. Why? It is not because it is not important but because, as such, they did not need it. This was not their main concern. He has other problems to deal with. He is writing to a special group of Gentiles who had come under the influence of Judaism and had cast off idolatry to accept God.

Mark is mentioned eight times in the New Testament in these places: Acts 12:12, 25; 13:5, 13; 15:37, 39; Colossians 4:10 (here he is called Marcus); Philemon 24; 2 Timothy 4:11; and 1 Peter 5:13. It seems that Mark then is really an expanded commentary on Acts 10:34-43, where we have the record of the first Gentile convert.

Mark begins with the preaching of John the Baptist. The theme of Mark might well be “He hath done all things well” (Mark 7:37). I think that it can be shown that Mark is a book about what Christ did instead of what Christ said. Not that there is any competition between the two, for one is just as important as the other. Out of about thirty-nine miracles that Jesus did, twenty-one are recorded in the book of Mark. But, out of about thirty-one parables that Jesus spoke, only about five are included in Mark. The apostles were witnesses that Jesus was raised from the dead and sent the apostles out.

Mark is going to tell us about this in some detail. Look at Mark 1: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Look at the word “Jesus”—meaning “Saviour”—having to do with His humanity. He was a man. Christ means “the anointed—the Messiah.” This goes back to the Old Testament. Here is a Man that was the promised Messiah. But, he also mentions that He is the Son of God. There is His Deity. So in verse one we have the humanity of Christ, His mission, and His nature. This is what Mark will develop. Why was He born? Why did He live? What was His nature? What is this all about?

Mark 1:2 says, “written in the prophets.” The ASV says Isaiah put a parenthesis right here. Then notice: “I send my messenger.” This is Malachi 3:1. This introduces John the Baptist. The next verse tells us what it is all about. Mark 1:3 is taken from Isaiah. So we need to go back to see some things about Isaiah. This is tied to the Old Testament. Romans 15:4 states the case for knowing the Old Testament. We can understand why he is quoting Isaiah in introducing the book of Mark. Mark is going to unfold the Gospel that Isaiah foretold. Isaiah is sometimes called the “Gospel of Christ of the Old Testament.” Brother E. Claude Gardner has a sermon titled “The Fifth Gospel,” which is about Isaiah 53. Mark is going to unfold what Isaiah foretold in Isaiah 7:14; 9:6-7. Mark will show Christ as a suffering Servant, and in that we have two things: (1) Sacrifice. This demanded priesthood—a go-between. (2) Priesthood. Priesthood and sacrifice are God’s ways. Matthew presents Christ as King. Mark pictures Him as Priest. Man needs an Intercessor. Look at Mark 10:45: “For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

This is a description of what Mark is about. This verse shows the sacrifice and ministry of a priest. He came to minister as priest. This would **demand** sacrifice. Mark will help us understand this better. Without sacrifice and priesthood, we would have no Gospel.

The Jews did not understand the matter of kingship. Remember that it was the Jews who wanted a king. Mark emphasizes that man not only needs a king; he also needs a priest. So he will unfold the life of Christ in relationship to priesthood. He will show that sacrifice and priesthood are essential to have the right relationship with God. This is a brief introduction and outline of the book of Mark.

Mark Thirteen

Mark 13, Matthew 24, and Luke 21 are often misunderstood in the religious world in general. Every mainline denomination that I personally know of uses these chapters to urge onward their false doctrine of premillennialism. Part of their forte lies within these passages. Some of our own are false brethren who hold these chapters as being the second coming of Christ. The doctrine is referred to as “Kingism” after its founder, Max King. Needless to say, there is much false teaching about these verses.

In Mark’s record this chapter grows out of the fact that Jesus in Mark 12 is in the temple teaching. Jesus has cautioned the people regarding the scribes and their conduct. They wore long robes, and they loved salutations in the markets. They wanted the chief seats in the synagogues and the uppermost rooms at their feast days. While appearing to be so pious and upright, they destroyed the houses of widows. In pretense they prayed long prayers, indicating that they wanted to be seen, but especially heard, by mankind.

While Jesus was in the temple at Jerusalem, He observed people casting their money into the treasury. Some who were rich cast in much, but a certain poor widow threw two mites into the treasury. Jesus used her to teach His disciples a lesson. He observed that this poor widow had cast in more than the wealthy, for she cast in of her want all that she had, while the others only cast in from their abundance. It is out of this background that Mark 13 begins. Chapter divisions are sometimes unfortunate. Such is the case here in Mark 13. The first word of this chapter is “And.” This is an indication in the remainder of this verse that He was through at this time with His temple teaching. He and His disciples are leaving the temple when

they likely gesture while saying, “see what manner of stones and what buildings are here!” (13:1).

Jesus tells them that these stones will soon not be so beautiful. They will come crumbling down. Not one stone will be left upon another but will be thrown down. One can imagine their amazement at these statements of our Lord. Mark 13:3 tells us that Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked Him privately the following: “Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign when all these things shall be fulfilled?” (13:4). Using also Matthew’s account in chapter 24, it appears that the disciples are asking at least three different questions. Luke’s record, like Mark’s, seems to have two questions. In all likelihood they thought they were asking one question. Remember that they did not understand what Jesus was conveying. Jesus also answers the questions in parts.

I would like to borrow from brother Luke the phrase “**these things**.” In Luke 21:6, “these things” had to do with the temple building (“stones” in Mark’s record). Then the disciples ask, “when shall **these things** be?” (Luke 21:7, emp. mine throughout, HD). They are startled that Jesus had said that these stones would not be left one upon the other. They are asking when this is going to happen. In Luke 21:9, Jesus told them that certain signs would come and called them “**these things**.” Teaching them now at length, He says in Luke 21:28: “And when **these things** begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh.” He proceeds then to show them through a parable of how they could expect to see figs upon a tree and what season was at hand. By comparison, He then announces:

So likewise ye, when ye see these things come to pass, know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh at hand. Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass away, till all be

fulfilled. Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away (21:31-33).

The phrase “these things” in Matthew, Mark, and Luke is the key to understanding that Christ is talking about an event in history that would take place while some of those living at that time would observe. That being the case, it is obvious Jesus is talking about judgment on Jerusalem. Where were they at? Jerusalem! What buildings were they pointing out to Christ? The temple buildings! What stones is He talking about that would one day be cast down and destroyed? The stones of which the temple were made! What has this teaching grown out of? Judaism! So what is the lesson? Jerusalem will one day be destroyed, and the skeletal remains of the Law that the Jews were holding on to would come to an abrupt end. While the Law of Moses ended at the cross (Col. 2:14; Eph. 2:15-16), the Jews were not content to accept that fact. They were adamant in holding on to the Law, which, by their actions, they were not keeping to begin with. They had long since forgotten the real meaning of the Law and its purpose, which was to lead men down to Christ and His covenant.

Mark also employs the phrase “these things” (13:4, 29-30), while using “such things” in verse 7. Like Matthew’s record and Luke’s record, Mark’s record is pointing to the same event and the signs that would lead up to that event.

Jesus at this point has answered all their questions except one: “the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world” (cf. Matt. 24:3). Now He says, “But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father” (Mark 13:32). I do not pretend to have all the answers regarding the fact that Jesus said that He did not know when “that day and hour” would come. I accept it as true, whether I can explain it or not. I believe that it can be proven that Deity need

not know everything in order to be omniscient. Such is certainly the case here of Christ. There is nothing wrong if He chooses to limit Himself or God limit Himself.

The Absent Householder

Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is. For the Son of man is as a man taking a far journey, who left his house, and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch. Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning: Lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping. And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch (Mark 13:33-37).

Jesus nowhere calls this a parable. He spoke of the fig tree in parabolic language in verses 28 and 29. He simply says here “take ye heed” (v. 33). Notice that in Mark 13:5, 9 Jesus employs the phrase “take heed.” In Mark 13:23, 33, He says, “take ye heed.” Four times in this chapter, He says “take heed.” He had warned them of deception and this is what “take heed” appeals to. Through everything that they would encounter during those trying times, they were to “take heed.” The admonition is not only the signs only but of their own lives and the end of time.

Teaching Of Judgment

The lesson should be obvious to His disciples and all who will read. We do not know when the end of time is going to come. People have for years predicted when the end of the world would come. Have you ever stopped to think about if someone knows when the world is coming to an end, they also know when it is not coming to an end? Logic demands this conclusion. If I knew Christ was coming today, that eliminates His coming tomorrow. If not, why

not? Of that coming we have no clue. As with the man taking his journey, Christ has taken His journey and now reigns on the right hand of God. Just when He is going to get up from that right hand and come we know not. Peter said:

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up (2 Pet. 3:10).

“As a thief” suggests that we know not when the thief will come. Jesus said about a thief:

And this know, that if the goodman of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched, and not have suffered his house to be broken through (Luke 12:39).

If we knew when He was coming, we might just sit and fold our arms and wait. We do know that He is coming, but we know not when. We also know the judgment will then begin.

This is precisely why Jesus gives the “watch” word of warning. Let us notice some Scriptures of warning: “For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?” (Rev. 6:17) and “Verily I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment, than for that city” (Matt. 10:15). Think about those words “more tolerable”! What do they mean? Hear it again: “But I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you” (11:22). Again, “But I say unto you, That it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee” (11:24). I cannot imagine it being more “tolerable” for wicked Sodom and Gomorrah than for those listed or, for that matter, even us today. I think I know

what tolerable means, but I do not think I can convey it to suit myself. I might not know all that it means, but I do know that it is associated with judgment in these passages. I also know that opportunity plus ability equals responsibility. That being true, it is a fearful thing to think about old wicked Sodom having a better chance than me! It is true! Let God be true in all things and every man a liar. God's Word means what it says in every situation.

“Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world” (1 John 4:17). John says there is going to be a Day of Judgment. Jesus said in John 5:22-23:

For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son: That all men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father which hath sent him.

Jesus is going to be the judge. The standard will be the Word (cf. John 12:48).

Him God raised up the third day, and showed him openly....And he commanded us to preach unto the people, and to testify that it is he which was ordained of God to be the Judge of quick and dead (Acts 10:40, 42).

The judgment is vouched safe by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. By this I mean that, as sure as Christ was raised from the dead, there will be a Day of Judgment. Notice Acts 17:30-31:

And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent. Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.

In the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel (Rom. 2:16).

I may be able to keep a secret from you or hide something from you and you from me. Every secret thing will be brought to light in the Day of Judgment. This ought to make us search our hearts!

When? John 6:39-40, 44 says, “the last day.” This is the only clue we have. What is going to happen? The Lord will come in the clouds (Acts 1:9; Rev. 1:7). Every eye will see Him. There will be no mistake about it. We will know then when it is.

We will give an account of ourselves: “But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ” (Rom. 14:10). We might get the impression from reading this verse that there will be such a crowd that I will be insignificant. However, when you read the following verse it should shake us all down in our bones: “So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God” (14:12). I am going to give an account of myself and you yourself before God. There is no getting around it!:

And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power; When he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe (because our testimony among you was believed) in that day. Wherefore also we pray always for you, that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfil all the good pleasure of his goodness, and the work of faith with power (2 Thess. 1:7-11).

We cannot say that the Word does not make it plain.

What did Jesus say? “Take ye heed...Commanded the porter to watch...Watch ye therefore...And what I say unto you I say unto all, watch” (Mark 13:33-35, 37). In every passage of my appointed text, with one exception, Jesus says “watch.” Are we watching? Are we ready? There is a great day coming, and I want to be ready, and I want you to be ready too.

CHAPTER 25

The Parable Of The Wedding Feast

Tommy Hicks

Introduction¹

WHAT A DIFFERENCE A week can make. On day one of the week before Christ's crucifixion, He rode triumphantly into Jerusalem. He was met by "a very great multitude" who:

spread their garments in the way...cut down branches from the trees, and strawed them in the way. And the multitudes that went before, and that followed, cried, saying, Hosanna to the Son of David: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest (Matt. 21:8-9).

Before the week was over, a multitude of the people was crying, "Crucify him" (Mark 15:8-13).

Speaking of the attitude the Jews would have toward the Messiah, the prophet had foretold, "He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not" (Isa. 53:3). John, the "apostle of love," wrote, "He came unto his own, and his own received him not" (John 1:11).

During the week before Christ's crucifixion, tensions grew. Conflicts mounted. Words and actions became more severe. By day three of that intense week, Jesus made it

known that God would reject the Jews, that Jerusalem would be destroyed, and that God would turn to those who were not Abraham's physical descendants. One of the ways He did this was through His parable of the wedding feast.

Christ's parable of the wedding feast is found only in Matthew 22:2-14. Some have questioned if this is the same parable that is found in Luke 14:16-24. Expressing the view that the parable in Matthew 22:2-14 may have been a "remodeling" of the parable in Luke 14:16-24, conservative commentators generally agree that it is not the same parable. Dealing with the parable of the wedding feast and the parable found in Luke, Broadus observed:

This is found in Matt. only, but the first part resembles a parable given by Luke as spoken some time earlier. (Luke 14:16-24) Some critics at once assume that only one parable was given. But any man who ever went to and fro as a preacher will know that to repeat an illustration to a new audience with some modification is perfectly natural....It has been held that a parable cannot have been spoken at this point, between the rise of the feelings described in 21:45f. and the consultation of 22:15. But why not? It required only a few minutes. And 21:46 is a general statement, covering much that followed.²

Concerning the parable of the wedding feast, Pendleton said, "I regard this parable as a remodeling of the parable given by Luke, the changes being made to suit the changed relation between Jesus and his auditors."³

Comparing Matthew with Mark and Luke (the other "Synoptic Gospels"), it can be easily established that Jesus taught the parable of the wedding feast on the third day after His entry into Jerusalem. Matthew 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; and Luke 20:9-19 record Christ's parable of the wicked husbandmen. Immediately following the parable of the wicked husbandmen, Mark and Luke recorded the

efforts by the Herodians, Sadducees, and Pharisees to ensnare the Lord (cf. Mark 12:13ff and Luke 20:20ff). However, between the parable of the wicked husbandmen and the account of the temptations by the Herodians, Sadducees, and Pharisees, Matthew included the parable of the wedding feast (cf. Matt. 21:33-46; 22:1-15ff). Hermeneutically speaking, there is no reason to conclude that the parable of the wedding feast is “out of place” or that it does not belong where Matthew placed it. Contextually, it fits with what Jesus had just previously taught and with what He would teach in the days which followed.

Characters And Events

Unless one can recognize the characters and/or the events included in a parable, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to understand what is being taught. Characters in a parable indicate the persons who are involved in the lesson being conveyed. Events set out in a parable show what is going to happen and frequently disclose the points being made by a parable.

Little difficulty is encountered in identifying the characters in the parable of the wedding feast. The King (Matt. 22:2, 7, 11, 13) represents God. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is represented by the King’s Son (22:2). Those invited, bidden once and again, but who refused the King’s invitations, are the Jews (22:3-4). No doubt, the servants going forth with the King’s invitations to the wedding feast stand for God’s prophets, John the Immerser, the apostles, and other proclaimers of God’s Word—certainly this would even include Jesus (22:3-4, 6, 8, 10; cf. 21:37-40). Yet the last mentioned servants (22:13) must be spiritual beings empowered to carry out God’s will in judgment. Guests, “bad and good,” who accepted the King’s invitation to those in the highways (22:10) should be understood to be the Gentiles. Condemned, bound, and expelled from the

wedding feast, the guest without the “wedding garment” (22:11-13) characterizes those who accept the Lord’s invitation, but then, later, are lost.

Events brought out in the parable of the wedding feast are easily discerned. Since this parable is about the prophesied “kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 22:2), and since the kingdom and the church are one and the same (16:18-19), and since Christ is the bridegroom (Mark 2:18-20), and the church is His bride (Rev. 21:9; Eph. 5:25-32), it only stands to reason that the “wedding feast” (Matt. 22:3-4, 8) has to do with the church/New Testament dispensation. Their refusal to accept the King’s invitation (22:3-6) pictures the Jews’ rejection of their Messiah, His Word, and the kingdom/church He came to establish. Because the Jews rejected God’s Son, His rejection of the Jews is manifested by the destruction of their city (22:7-8), Jerusalem, in A.D. 70. Having rejected the Jews, the servants being sent to the highways to invite guests (22:9-10) shows God turning to the Gentiles and allowing them to receive the blessings of being in His kingdom. Judgment is represented by the coming of the King to see His guests (22:11). That some in the kingdom/church can forfeit their salvation and spend eternity in hell is illustrated by the man without a wedding garment being bound and cast into outer darkness (22:13).

God’s Invitations Extended

Evidently, when Christ spoke the parable of the wedding feast, it was a customary practice to invite the intended guests to a wedding feast well ahead of the occasion. Then, when the feast was fully prepared, a second invitation was sent to “them that were bidden to the wedding.” Explaining the need for such multiple invitations, Broadus stated:

The guests were invited in advance and then, being close together in a crowded Eastern city, and not generally supplied with convenient time-pieces, they were notified when the feast was ready.⁴

Whatever the custom may have been, those mentioned by Christ in this parable had been previously invited.

From the time of Abraham, God repeatedly made His Messianic promise to the Hebrew people. Abraham was told, "And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 22:18). Inspired by God, Paul wrote, "Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ" (Gal. 3:16). This promise was repeated to Isaac (Gen. 26:24), to Jacob (28:14), and to David (2 Sam. 7:11-16; 1 Chron. 17:10-14). Not only did this promise pertain to individuals, it applied to the nation of Israel as a whole (Exod. 2:24). For over a thousand years, God informed the nation of Israel about the coming Messiah (Deut. 18:15, 18-19) and His eternal kingdom (Dan. 2:44). Through the prophets of old, God sent His invitation to Israel (cf. Isa. 2:2-4; Jer. 3:16-17; Ezek. 38:16, 23; Amos 9:11-12; Zech. 2:11; Mal. 1:11). Coffman commented:

Israel had long known of that approaching appointment to receive and honor the King's Son when he should appear in their midst. Their whole nation had been protected and nurtured through long history for the specific of equipping them to recognize and hail their Messiah when he came. The first of those servants sent to announce that the great feast was at hand was John the Baptist. They rejected him. They also rejected the apostles, mistreating them and bluntly rejecting the invitation, offering no excuse, but simply refusing to come to the marriage feast.⁵

Isaiah had prophesied that one would come preaching: “Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Isa. 40:3). Mark applied this prophesy to John the Immerser, saying:

As it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins (Mark 1:2-4).

Letting men know that the wedding feast was at hand was the purpose for John’s preaching. He extended the invitation to attend to the Jews when he preached, “Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 3:2). Preaching the same theme, other servants issued God’s invitation to the Jews:

Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel (Mark 1:14-15).

When Jesus sent forth the twelve apostles, He:

commanded them, saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand (Matt. 10:5-7).

Again, in giving the “Limited Commission” to the seventy, Jesus instructed them to preach, “The kingdom of God is come nigh unto you” (Luke 10:1, 9). Well before Jesus entered into Jerusalem that week before His crucifixion, all Israel had heard that invitation—an invitation that would be ultimately rejected.

Rejection Of God's Invitations

Rather than accepting John's invitation, some claimed, "He hath a devil" (Matt. 11:18). Questioned by Jesus, "The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men?," the religious leaders among the Jews manifested their rejection of John and God's invitation as:

they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him? But if we shall say, Of men; we fear the people; for all hold John as a prophet (21:25-26).

Strongly rebuking those who rejected John, Jesus summed up the matter thusly:

But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet. This is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. For I say unto you, Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist: but he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he. And all the people that heard him, and the publicans, justified God, being baptized with the baptism of John. But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God against themselves, being not baptized of him (Luke 7:26-30).

But this would not be the last time the Christ would rebuke the Jews for their treatment and rejection of God's messengers. Powerfully pronouncing "Woe" upon "Woe" upon the scribes and Pharisees for the way Israel treated those sent (past, present, and future) by God, Jesus declared:

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous, And say,

If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets. Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers. Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?

Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city: That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar. Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! (Matt. 23:29-37).

Instead of accepting the invitation of the Savior, Who loved them, and the greatest of all God's messengers (Heb. 1:1-2), the Jews killed Him.

Aware of the Jews' animosity toward Him, Jesus began to teach "that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders, and of the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mark 8:31). In the parable of the wicked husbandmen, the parable just before the parable of the wedding feast, Jesus had expressed what was going to happen to Him:

When the husbandmen saw the son, they said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance. And they caught him, and cast him out of the vineyard, and slew him (Matt. 21:38-39).

Furthermore, Jesus taught that He would be rejected by that generation, saying He must “suffer many things, and be rejected of this generation” (Luke 17:25). It was the voice of that generation which cried out, “Crucify him, crucify him” (23:21). Subsequent to Christ’s crucifixion, Peter indicted the Jews:

Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain (Acts 2:22-23).

Paul said the Jews:

killed the Lord Jesus, and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they please not God, and are contrary to all men: Forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they might be saved, to fill up their sins alway: for the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost (1 Thess. 2:15-16).

God’s Rejection Of The Jews

Remember, a week can make a lot of difference. Having entered Jerusalem on day one, Jesus went immediately to, and cleansed, the temple. Accomplishing this, He declared, “It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves” (Matt. 21:13). Notice, at this point in time, Jesus still referred to the temple as “My house,” meaning that God still claimed it. However, by Matthew 23:38, Jesus was referring to the temple as “your house”—“Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.” God had rejected the Jews; He had vacated the temple.

Being rejected by the Jews:

Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders

rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes? Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof (Matt. 21:42-43).

Distinctly, Jesus said the kingdom of God would be taken from the Jews and given to another people. What better way to show God's rejection of the Jews than for Him to bring about the destruction of the Temple and the entire city of Jerusalem?

Infuriated by the responses the invited guests gave to his invitations and angered by the treatment his servants had received, the King, in the parable of the wedding feast, "sent forth his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city" (Matt. 22:7). Jerusalem is the city in question. Giving credence to this, Matthew 24:1-2 states:

And Jesus went out, and departed from the temple: and his disciples came to him for to shew him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said unto them, See ye not all these things? verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down.

Such a thing might have seemed hardly possible at the time, but God does not lie.

Approximately 40 years later, in A.D. 70, Rome's armies were used as the instruments of God to carry out His will. Ironically, the general in charge of the Roman armies gave orders for the temple to be preserved. Contrary to their general's orders, but in keeping with God's plans for the city and temple, the Roman armies were outraged by the Jews (especially when they saw the atrocities the Jews committed against themselves during the siege). Though lengthy, a quote from Josephus' **Jewish Wars**, book 6, chapter 4, paragraphs 5-7 is appropriate here:

5. So Titus retired into the tower of Antonia, and resolved to storm the temple the next day, early in the morning, with his whole army, and to encamp round about the holy house. But as for that house, God had, for certain, long ago doomed it to the fire; and now that fatal day was come, according to the revolution of ages; it was the tenth day of the month Lous, [Ab,] upon which it was formerly burnt by the king of Babylon; although these flames took their rise from the Jews themselves, and were occasioned by them; for upon Titus's retiring, the seditious lay still for a little while, and then attacked the Romans again, when those that guarded the holy house fought with those that quenched the fire that was burning the inner [court of the] temple; but these Romans put the Jews to flight, and proceeded as far as the holy house itself. At which time one of the soldiers, without staying for any orders, and without any concern or dread upon him at so great an undertaking, and being hurried on by a certain divine fury, snatched somewhat out of the materials that were on fire, and being lifted up by another soldier, he set fire to a golden window, through which there was a passage to the rooms that were round about the holy house, on the north side of it. As the flames went upward, the Jews made a great clamor, such as so mighty an affliction required, and ran together to prevent it; and now they spared not their lives any longer, nor suffered any thing to restrain their force, since that holy house was perishing, for whose sake it was that they kept such a guard about it.

6. And now a certain person came running to Titus, and told him of this fire, as he was resting himself in his tent after the last battle; whereupon he rose up in great haste, and, as he was, ran to the holy house, in order to have a stop put to the fire; after him followed all his commanders, and after them followed the several legions, in great astonishment; so there was a great clamor and tumult raised, as was natural upon the disorderly motion of so great an army. Then did Caesar, both by calling to the soldiers that were fighting, with a loud voice,

and by giving a signal to them with his right hand, order them to quench the fire. But they did not hear what he said, though he spake so loud, having their ears already dimmed by a greater noise another way; nor did they attend to the signal he made with his hand neither, as still some of them were distracted with fighting, and others with passion. But as for the legions that came running thither, neither any persuasions nor any threatenings could restrain their violence, but each one's own passion was his commander at this time; and as they were crowding into the temple together, many of them were trampled on by one another, while a great number fell among the ruins of the cloisters, which were still hot and smoking, and were destroyed in the same miserable way with those whom they had conquered; and when they were come near the holy house, they made as if they did not so much as hear Caesar's orders to the contrary; but they encouraged those that were before them to set it on fire. As for the seditious, they were in too great distress already to afford their assistance [towards quenching the fire]; they were every where slain, and every where beaten; and as for a great part of the people, they were weak and without arms, and had their throats cut wherever they were caught. Now round about the altar lay dead bodies heaped one upon another, as at the steps (16) going up to it ran a great quantity of their blood, whither also the dead bodies that were slain above [on the altar] fell down.

7. And now, since Caesar was no way able to restrain the enthusiastic fury of the soldiers, and the fire proceeded on more and more, he went into the holy place of the temple, with his commanders, and saw it, with what was in it, which he found to be far superior to what the relations of foreigners contained, and not inferior to what we ourselves boasted of and believed about it. But as the flame had not as yet reached to its inward parts, but was still consuming the rooms that were about the holy house, and Titus supposing what the fact was, that the house itself might yet be saved, he came

in haste and endeavored to persuade the soldiers to quench the fire, and gave order to Liberalius the centurion, and one of those spearmen that were about him, to beat the soldiers that were refractory with their staves, and to restrain them; yet were their passions too hard for the regards they had for Caesar, and the dread they had of him who forbade them, as was their hatred of the Jews, and a certain vehement inclination to fight them, too hard for them also. Moreover, the hope of plunder induced many to go on, as having this opinion, that all the places within were full of money, and as seeing that all round about it was made of gold. And besides, one of those that went into the place prevented Caesar, when he ran so hastily out to restrain the soldiers, and threw the fire upon the hinges of the gate, in the dark; whereby the flame burst out from within the holy house itself immediately, when the commanders retired, and Caesar with them, and when nobody any longer forbade those that were without to set fire to it. And thus was the holy house burnt down, without Caesar's approbation.⁶

This marked the end of the Jewish economy, temple worship, and other things necessary for the Jewish system (including genealogical records). God was through with the Israel which claimed to be the physical descendants of Abraham.

God Invites The Gentiles

Forsaking those who had been "bidden" (the Jews), God invites those who had not been "bidden" (the Gentiles). This is the significance of:

Then saith he to his servants, The wedding is ready, but they which were bidden were not worthy. Go ye therefore into the highways, and as many as ye shall find, bid to the marriage. So those servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all as many as they

found, both bad and good: and the wedding was furnished with guests (Matt. 22:8-10).

“Go ye therefore into the highways” reminds one of “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15).

Israel should have known what would happen. Moses had foretold:

They have moved me to jealousy with that which is not God; they have provoked me to anger with their vanities; and I will move them to jealousy with those which are not a people; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation (Deut. 32:21).

Paul took away Israel’s excuse for “not knowing” when he applied Moses’ statement to Israel and to Gentiles. He wrote:

But I say, Did not Israel know? First Moses saith, I will provoke you to jealousy by them that are no people, and by a foolish nation I will anger you....I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid; but rather through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy. (Rom. 10:19; 11:11).

James, appealing to the prophecy found in Amos 9:11-12, shows that God planned to invite the Gentiles into the kingdom. Interestingly, the time when such would be done is implied in the references to the tabernacle of David being rebuilt. Acts 15:15-17 reads:

And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things.

Old Testament prophecy pointed to a time when Gentiles would trust, serve, and glorify God. This would be when the “root of Jesse” (Jesus Christ) ruled over them. Plainly, Paul penned:

And that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy; as it is written, For this cause I will confess to thee among the Gentiles, and sing unto thy name. And again he saith, Rejoice, ye Gentiles, with his people. And again, Praise the Lord, all ye Gentiles; and laud him, all ye people. And again, Esaias saith, There shall be a root of Jesse, and he that shall rise to reign over the Gentiles; in him shall the Gentiles trust (Rom. 15:9-12).

Prior to that time, Paul noted that the Gentiles were “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12).

Moses’ Law separated—divided—the Jew and the Gentile. It was a “middle wall of partition” (Eph. 2:14). Speaking to Gentile converts, Paul heralded:

But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both (Jew and Gentile, TH) one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain (Jew and Gentile, TH) one new man, so making peace; And that he might reconcile both (Jew and Gentile, TH) unto God in one body (the church, TH) by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh. For through him we both (Jew and Gentile, TH) have access by one Spirit unto the Father. Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God (2:13-19).

Indeed, Gentiles have every reason to rejoice. Yet, it must be understood and emphasized that God planned to save the Gentiles all along.

Abraham was promised, "In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 22:18). Now it is understood that "all the nations" included the Gentiles. Dealing with this, Paul explained:

That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ....For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Gal. 3:14, 26-29).

Truly, the Jews did not understand that the Gentiles were included in the promise made to Abraham. To them God's plan was a "mystery." Paul expressed it this way:

For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles, If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward: How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words, Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ) Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel: Whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power. Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ; And to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the

beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ: To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God, According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord (Eph. 3:1-11).

That the Gentiles would be in the kingdom was a part of the “eternal purpose” of God.

The Expelled Guest

Judgment is the point being made by the King coming to “see the guests” (Matt. 22:11). The King had already judged the rejecting Jews, those who refused his invitation, to be unworthy (22:8). They did not even make it to the wedding feast. Now, however, the King comes to the wedding feast and there finds an “unworthy” guest, one not wearing a wedding garment. Without hesitation, the King asked this one, “Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless” (22:12). By virtue of the fact that the man was “speechless,” the implication is that he had no excuse: “Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (22:13). Boles stressed the extremes between those at the wedding feast and the place of outer darkness:

He is cast out from the full blaze and splendor of the feast into outer darkness of the street...It was customary to bind a criminal for his doom; so this man was bound and thrown from the splendor of the banquet into the horrors of the midnight street. “There shall be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth.” This adds vividness to the description of the “outer darkness,” and widens the contrast between the splendor of the marriage banquet and the darkness of the

street; it may signify the contrasts between the glories of heaven and the anguish of hell.⁷

The point is that, just because a person is a member of the church, it does not mean that he can take his salvation for granted.

Conclusion

Jesus ended the parable of the wedding feast with these words: “For many are called, but few are chosen” (Matt. 22:14). That being the case, Paul’s exhortation, “Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12), has special significance. Every man must make his calling and election sure (2 Pet. 1:10).

Endnotes

1 Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the King James Version.

2 John A. Broadus, **Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew** (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press), p. 445.

3 J.W. McGarvey & Philip Y. Pendleton, **The Fourfold Gospel** (Cincinnati, OH: The Standard Publishing), p. 596.

4 Broadus, p. 446.

5 James Burton Coffman, **Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew** (Austin, TX: Firm Foundation Publishing House, 1968), p. 342.

6 [http://www.biblestudytools.net/History/BC/Flavius Josephus/?book=War_6&chapter=4](http://www.biblestudytools.net/History/BC/Flavius%20Josephus/?book=War_6&chapter=4)

7 H. Leo Boles, **A Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew** (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1967), p. 430.

CHAPTER 26

The Parables Of The Lost Sheep And Lost Coin

Bill Bryant

Introduction

SHE GREW UP IN the rural South during the Depression with few material possessions. Times were hard then and remained hard for the duration of her life. She married during her teen years with hopes and dreams of a good marriage and family, but it never materialized. Her husband's frequent battles with alcoholism and adultery left her and her four children in constant despair. She tolerated it until the last child left home. She divorced him and then moved to a metropolitan city nearby, in hopes of a new start and to be near the joy of her life, her grandchildren. Her limited education and chronic health problems kept her in low-paying jobs. Eventually, her health deteriorated to the point that work was no longer an option. Government welfare, the projects, and emphysema make up the life she now knows, the rewards of a life of hard work and faithfulness to her family and friends. In bitterness, she has turned to alcohol as well. Does God care?

He was raised in the Lord's church by good parents. He attended all the worship services and youth activities. People were convinced that he would be a great leader in the church someday. He graduated with honors from his

high school and the state university with a degree in business. He was heavily recruited by a number of Fortune 500 companies, but chose to work with a small company with tremendous potential. He soon married a young lady he had met in college. Two years after marriage, the first of three children was born. He was promoted up the corporate ladder quickly. Job transfers were frequent, but the promotions and pay increases were too good to turn down. Everything seemed to be going well. His business ingenuity, tremendous work ethic, and willingness to accept and thrive with responsibility served him and his growing company well. He is a success, a perfect example of the American dream. He has a beautiful home, a wife who adores him, children in private schools that are active in sports, and is well on his way to reaching his financial goals for an early retirement. But all is not well, for, somewhere along the way, he left his first love. His wife was not raised in the church and was dependent upon him to provide the spiritual leadership. He tried to be a good Christian husband and father during the early years of marriage and family, but his burning desire for business success and the rewards that accompanied it were constant temptations. He would have been a great leader in the Lord's church, but the deceitfulness of riches eventually won out. His parents remain heart-broken. They wonder where they went wrong. They worry about his soul and pray for him night and day. Does God care?

He was introduced to the Lord's church by a high school friend. He soon became a New Testament Christian. He was quiet and shy and unskilled at making friends, but truly enjoyed the church youth group. His Christian friend saw to it that he always had a way to every worship service and youth group activity. But after a period of time, his Christian friend left to attend college in a city far away. Transportation to and from services became an immediate

problem. His mother would occasionally take him, but certainly did not feel that he had to attend every church service and activity. Soon he was missing more services than he attended. Also, he found it increasingly harder to mesh with the other teens, with his best friend no longer around to encourage him and others. Eventually, within a matter of months, he stopped attending. Does God care?

The parables found in Luke 15 provide some of the greatest Biblical material available to mankind in answer to the question, "Does God care?" Yes, God cares! His precious Son cares! The Holy Spirit cares! Heaven cares! The Lord's disciples should care, but every generation produces those who do not care for the lost. Luke 19:10 tells us, "For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost." Matthew 9:13 tells us that He did "not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." It is hard to imagine anyone claiming to be a true Christian who does not share the same passionate purpose and conviction. One writer has well said that religious people who have "no time for sinful men are out of touch with God."¹ I am convinced that the details of Luke 15 are not taught often enough in the brotherhood, for our efforts in evangelism and in restoring lost souls in many congregations are appalling. Far too many Christians share the sinful attitude of the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son. Instead of rejoicing over those who repent, many fret and worry about getting their fair share of the pot.

Background And Occasion Of The Parables

The Publicans And Sinners

Luke 15:1 tells us, "Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him." Publicans were the tax collectors who made themselves rich at the expense of their Jewish countrymen. They worked for the despised

Romans and were often guilty of extortion and blackmail. It would be difficult during Jesus' day to find a class of people who were more hated than the publicans. The sinners were those who were guilty of immorality along with defiling beloved Jewish tradition. Both the publicans and sinners were the outcasts of society and to be avoided at all costs. One could ruin his reputation quickly by any association with them, which would be interpreted as supporting their evil deeds.

The Pharisees And Scribes

Luke goes on to say, "And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them" (15:2). The Pharisees were a religious and political party in Palestine in Christ's day who were known for insisting that the Law of God be observed as the scribes interpreted it. The Pharisees were fanatics about ritual and tithing. They generally had little to do with anyone other than Pharisees because they felt all others would contaminate them. They appeared to observe the Law of Moses carefully, but their hearts were often far from God (Matt. 15:1-9). They served God out of a wrong motive, the praise of men (6:2, 5, 16; 23:5-7). The Lord often called the Pharisees hypocrites because their hearts did not match their outward appearance. The scribes were considered by most as experts on the Law of Moses. Their interpretations and judgments carried a great deal of authority. Many of the members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish High Court, were scribes. A number of the scribes were also Pharisees because the Pharisees did uphold the traditions and authority of the scribes.

Terry Varner provides an excellent outline of the slanderous charges made by the Pharisees against the Lord. He writes:

They charged Jesus with (1) being a glutton (Matt. 1:18-19), (2) being a winebibber (Matt. 11:18-19), (3) casting out demons by the power of Satan (Matt. 9:34; 12:22-32), (4) being Beelzebub (Matt. 10:25; 12:26-27), (5) being a sinner (John 9:24), (6) violating the Sabbath (Matt. 12:2), (7) being a Samaritan (John 8:48), (8) possessing a devil (John 8:48), (9) deceiving the people (Matt. 27:63), (10) leading the people astray (John 7:52), (11) possessing an unclean spirit (Mark 13:30), (12) being no prophet because He came from Galilee (John 7:52), (13) being “beside himself” (Mark 3:21), (14) transgressing the traditions of the elders (Matt. 15:2), (15) perverting the nation of Israel (Luke 23:2), (16) being an evildoer (John 18:30), (17) being not from God (John 9:16), and (18) making Himself as a king (Luke 23:2).²

Considering the multitude of false charges against Jesus by the Pharisees, perhaps we can see why they received the scathing rebuke from the Lord recorded in Matthew 23.

Jesus, The Seeker Of Every Lost Soul

The Pharisees and scribes intended to slander Jesus when they said, “This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.” However, this was a tremendous compliment because it showed His love for all men, especially the outcasts of society. Jesus had already taught that the poor and outcast of society should not be overlooked, but should be invited for a feast instead of friends and rich brethren and neighbors who could repay the deed (Luke 14:12-14). Jesus had indeed shared meals with publicans and sinners (5:27-32) and stated His purpose for such: they were sick and needed a Physician. Little did they know, at the time, that He was the Great Physician.

The publicans and sinners were attracted to Jesus because of His love and compassion for them (Luke 15:1). They wanted to hear Him speak. He had earned the right

to be heard by His love and concern for them. He had not despised them as the scribes and Pharisees did. He told them the truth about their lives and their sins, yet His message of salvation awakened hope within them, for this life and the one beyond the grave. He had not come to destroy them as others sought, but to save them (9:56). When the scribes and Pharisees observed the Lord's tenderness for those they despised, it made them all the more upset. The overwhelming majority of Pharisees never learned that Jesus came to preach repentance to the wicked to save their souls from death. They certainly deserved rebuke for condemning Jesus' love for lost souls. But instead of responding in vicious protest against them as many of us would, Jesus relates three parables intended to instruct them of how much God and heaven rejoice when one lost soul is found, even the soul of a publican or sinner.

The Parable Of The Lost Sheep

Jesus possessed the marvelous ability to relate stories from everyday Jewish life that helped people see the inconsistencies and wickedness of their ways. The parable of the lost sheep was intended to convey the message that man is of far greater value than sheep, especially in God's eyes:

And he spake this parable unto them, saying, What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance (Luke 15:3-7).

We often fail to consider the value of something until it is taken away or lost. This is especially true of the human soul. Our Lord told us that few souls will find the narrow path that leads to heaven (Matt. 7:13-14). Souls will be lost, but how? Charles Hodge makes the excellent point:

In teaching how God will run to forgive and to save, Jesus had to teach how men became lost. These men did not know what their problem was. They just knew they were lost and that seemingly there was no hope. They didn't know why nor where.³

The parables of Luke 15 are extremely valuable in helping us see how easy it is to allow our souls to become lost. We can lose our souls willfully or lose them through neglect, our own or the neglect of uncaring members of the church. Unfortunately, many will not fully understand the true value of their souls until it is too late (Matt. 16:26).

The Sheep

A great number of people are lost in the manner that sheep become lost. Sheep have a tendency to stray from other sheep and the shepherd. They become occupied with the search for grass. They wander from one hill and pasture to another and become lost unintentionally. They do not stop to think. They stop listening to the calls of the shepherd. Eventually they realize they are lost and have no idea of how to return home. They are defenseless and become easy prey for wild animals or can easily fall from high places attempting to navigate the narrow paths in their search for home. Many people become spiritually lost in the same way. They become so enamored with worldly riches and pleasures that they stray from the fold. They stop listening to the Shepherd of their souls. They do not intend to become lost, but do so because of distractions.

The Shepherd

The job of a shepherd was extremely demanding. He had to protect the flock from wild animals such as lions, wolves, and bears along with the threat from those who would steal the sheep. He was constantly exposed to extreme heat or cold. The animals would suffer scratches, cuts, and even broken legs that would require medical care. He would lead them from one pasture to another over rugged terrain with steep paths where the sheep could wander or fall. He would stay with them for days and weeks at a time, always on the lookout for danger. The good shepherds would come to know the sheep intimately and could sense when something was wrong. If one of the sheep was found missing, his love for the animal would keep him on the trail until it was found. Every animal received his best effort. As W. Gaddys Roy stated, "He did not rationalize that the sheep being lost was his fault, that it should not have wandered away, that it was of little value to the flock anyway, or that he still had ninety-nine sheep left."⁴

The Rejoicing

In the parable, a shepherd is willing to leave ninety-nine remaining sheep in the fold in order to find the one lost animal. He does not wait for it to find its way home, for it seldom would. The shepherd continues his search until the lost sheep is finally found. When he finds it, he does not strike the sheep in anger to punish it for the trouble it has caused, nor does he take out a whip and drive it back to the fold accompanied by a continual flow of words of harshness, but gently and lovingly places it on his shoulders for the journey home. Joy fills the heart of the shepherd. The animal is now safe from harm's way. Why so much joy? John McArthur explains:

There is special joy expressed for the sheep that is found not because it is more valued than the

other but because danger, hardship, and great need elicit special concern from the caring shepherd. In the same way, when one child in a family is ill, particularly if it is seriously ill, a mother will devote much more time and attention to him than to the other children, often more than to all the rest together. And when that child finally gets well, the mother does not rejoice for the children who have been healthy all along but for the one who was sick and suffering. And if the brothers and sisters are loving, they, too, will rejoice in the restoration of their sibling.⁵

The picture of a caring shepherd searching diligently for one of his lost sheep, even though a large flock of ninety-nine sheep remained safe, is touching. But then to consider his reaction when the lost sheep is found, to carry it home on his shoulders near his heart, to call his friends and neighbors to share in his joy and jubilation, is indeed a wonderful illustration of our Heavenly Father's regard for every soul He has created. And it is such a significant and important event that the heavenly host must know and celebrate as well. To be lost is so very terrible, but to be saved is so wonderful indeed.

Does the phrase, "more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance" (Luke 15:7), refer to the Pharisees and scribes? No! Jesus was just alluding to the attitude of spiritual security the Pharisees and scribes possessed. It was certainly unjustified. These parables were for them, and for people like them, to help them see how drastically different their hearts were from the great heart of God. If anyone needed to humbly repent, it was the scribes and Pharisees.

The Parable Of The Lost Coin

The apostle Paul informs us that God desires that "all men be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the

truth” (1 Tim. 2:4). The word “men” in this verse is translated from the Greek word **anthropos**, which means “mankind.” God loves every human being whether they be male or female, rich or poor, bond or free. His Word, the Bible, is full of stories in which every aspect of the human race can identify. Some 2,900 Bible characters are mentioned as God unfolds His grand and glorious scheme of redemption from Genesis to Revelation. Women are a great part of God’s story of mankind to mankind. In particular, the gospel of Luke contains a number of references to women and their interests. The parable of the lost coin is one in which every woman in Bible times could quickly comprehend. Luke writes:

Either what woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, doth not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently till she find it? And when she hath found it, she calleth her friends and her neighbours together, saying, Rejoice with me; for I have found the piece which I had lost. Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth (Luke 15:8-10).

What woman of any age has not experienced or known of the sorrow and subsequent joy when something possessing great sentimental value was lost and then found? We also see in this parable another way in which people can become lost. The sheep was lost through its own fault due to carelessness, but the coin was lost due to the carelessness of someone else. It is certainly true that everyone is responsible for his own sins and lost condition, but souls can be heavily influenced in a negative way by others and easily lost.

The Coin

Considering the abundance of coins and money today, some might read this parable and wonder why the woman

would search so diligently for one lost coin and celebrate with such fervor when found. In Bible times coins were rare. Much of the trade was by barter. Coins were far more precious then. Another reason for her diligent search, perhaps, is that mentioned by Neil Lightfoot:

The coin specified by Luke was a Greek **drachma**, which was almost equivalent to a Roman **denarius**. It was a silver coin, and although worth by our standards less than twenty cents, it was the common wage for a day's labor. Some scholars have suggested that in this case the coin was especially valuable to the woman since it formed an ornament for her head. It was customary for Jewish women to save up ten coins and string them together for a necklace or hairdress. The ornament became a treasured possession worn as the sign of a married woman, much like a wedding band is worn today.⁶

If this custom was true, then losing the coin had serious consequences. Her reputation was, in essence, at stake. It had to be found! Eastern houses then were constructed in such a way as to keep out the light and heat of the sun as much as possible.⁷ They generally consisted of dirt floors covered by dried reeds and rushes, providing a number of places where a lost coin could be lodged. The woman lit a candle and swept the house searching diligently for it until it was found. She, again, could have said, "I have nine more coins. I have only lost one. That's still a good number." But every coin was important to her, so she lit a candle and swept her house until the treasured coin was found.

The Rejoicing

Luke then records for us the jubilant rejoicing and celebration on the part of this woman and her friends and neighbors when the lost coin is found. She could not keep

the good news to herself. There was no reason to do so. For the greatest measure of joy and happiness comes to us when we can share the good news and blessings with friends, family, and neighbors. Even though considerable time and effort might have been expended in the search, there is not a hint of regret. The lost time might mean lost sleep because the workdays of first-century women were long and tiresome. But instead of complaint, her attitude was simply, "Rejoice with me; for I have found the piece which I had lost." When the precious piece was found, the effort, no matter how wearisome, was unimportant.

Present Day Applications Of The Parables

The parables of Luke 15 were intended initially to expose the cold and calloused hearts of the Pharisees and scribes. Even Pharisees and scribes could understand the shepherd's rejoicing when a lost sheep was found. Even Pharisees and scribes could understand a woman's rejoicing when a precious, lost coin was found. Even Pharisees and scribes could understand a father's rejoicing when his prodigal son returned home. Could they not care as much for lost souls, even the lost souls of publicans and sinners? If they could not, they possessed a heart completely foreign to the loving heart of God.

There are a number of applications of these two parables that can and should be made to the Lord's church today. I sincerely believe that our wonderful and loving God and Father is waiting for a greater measure of love for lost souls from us. Without it, evangelism in our churches will continue to die, fewer missionaries will be sent overseas, fewer members will cross the street to plant and water the seeds of the Gospel, fewer members will attempt to restore the erring, and more and more souls will enter eternity unprepared, with their blood on our hands because of our refusal to share our knowledge of

God's remedy for sin. Luke 15 is indeed one of the Bible's great chapters. It beautifully pictures the heart of a loving God Who is ready and willing to forgive and restore. Until we see that for ourselves and seek it for our own hearts, we will not notice or care about the lost and dying world. The following applications are submitted for your earnest and prayerful study and consideration.

1. Souls can become lost. The apostle Peter concludes his second and final epistle with this charge: "But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18). God has provided the child of God with all the wise counsel that he needs. Paul describes this wise counsel, the Word of God, as that which is "is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Man has no excuse for failing, but men often do. As one man wrote many years ago, "Baptism does not drown the Devil." Many may think the Christian life to be easy, but it is far from it, for "the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Pet. 5:8).

There are a great number of Bible passages that serve as a warning of the ways that man can fall and become lost. The two parables under consideration show how carelessness contributes to one becoming lost. All one has to do to lose his soul is to do nothing but drift. That is why the Hebrews writer encourages us to "give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip" (Heb. 2:1). The Christian can also become lost by deliberate disobedience. The Hebrew writer condemns this willful sin in 10:25-29. Jesus also warned us that we can allow the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches to choke the Word that abides in us (Matt. 13:22). We can also become spiritually overconfident, as was the case with Peter when he told the Lord that he

would give his very life before denying Him (26:35). But before the night was out, he had denied Him three times. We can also have our good morals corrupted by evil companionship (1 Cor. 15:33). Some also depart the fold through ignorance. Every Christian is exhorted to strive diligently to add the Christian graces (2 Pet. 1:5-9). The promise is made that, if one does these things, he will never fall (1:10). There are many ways in which a soul can become lost, and, unfortunately, most will (Matt. 7:13-14).

2. We are our brother's keeper. Since the very first family, people have pondered the question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Cain first asked that of the Lord God in Genesis 4:9. The answer is a resounding "Yes!" Paul reminds us that we are God's "workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). God has planned for His children to join Him in His great work, and what greater work is there than the work of saving lost souls? We are, therefore, given the charge:

Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins (Jas. 5:19-20).

When brethren are overtaken in a fault, spiritually minded Christians are commanded to "restore such a one in a spirit of meekness" (Gal. 6:1). Also, the apostle Paul wrote, "Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men" (1 Thess. 5:14). In Old Testament times, watchmen were given the important task of watching for the enemy. When the enemy approached, he would cry out to warn his people of the approaching danger. If he failed to warn, he paid with his life (Ezek. 3:18-21). We are no less responsible today!

In the parable of the lost sheep, we learn of a loving shepherd who would search diligently for the one lost sheep. He would not be content until he had done all he could. Such must be the mindset of the shepherds of God's spiritual flock today. Elders must oversee the flock, knowing that they will one day give an account for the souls entrusted to them (Heb. 13:17). Paul told the Ephesian elders to "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). He then warned them in the next verse of the grievous wolves that would enter in to harm the flock. The wolves are still around and having their way with too many flocks today, while the local shepherds remain huddled in a church conference room believing their work is limited to decision making. There is a desperate need in the Lord's church for godly shepherds who will diligently search for the missing sheep and then train spiritual members to do the same. The church has relied for far too long on its preachers to do its work in soul saving.

3. Christians must care. How could anyone searching for truth not quickly see the message of these parables? God cares! Charles Hodge drives this point home beautifully in the closing chapter of his book **Will God Run?**

God cares because shepherds care....God cares because owners care....God cares because fathers care....God cares! Lost—one world! Lost faith, morals, hope! But God cares! God provides! God is the chief sufferer of the universe. Truly there is no place where earth's sorrow is greater felt than in heaven.⁸

One of the most natural outgrowths of love for God is love for His children. The apostle John asks a pertinent question that many need to consider today in the church:

“If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?” (1 John 4:20).

Can we, for example, honestly say that we love an erring brother who has left the fold if no effort is expended to bring him back? If one of our children did not come home tonight, would we not search high and low, near and far, until he or she was found? Would not the thought of the dangers and peril of this world motivate us, even in weariness of flesh, to search diligently until we could lovingly hold them in our arms again? Nothing could hold us back. Then what holds us back from the lost that we know are in danger and peril of the greatest loss in the world, their soul? The answer is found in the parables of Luke 15.

Our Savior, in the Sermon on the Mount, challenges us to love our enemies and to pray for those who would spitefully use us (Matt. 5:44). What motivation would be sufficient for us to seek the good of others, even those who would treat us as enemies? He answers that question in the next verse: “That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.” His point? If we want to be like our Heavenly Father, then we will seek to have His heart, His nature, His love for all men. His heart and nature and love are beautifully pictured in Luke 15. For us to be His children, we will care for every lost soul, not just for family members and those who do good things for us!

4. The grace of God is available to those who will repent. It is impossible to bring someone back to the Lord that does not want to be His. God is gracious and loving, but His grace is extended only to those who will trust and obey. The sheep certainly did not deserve the diligent effort on the part of the shepherd to find it. The

sheep was careless when it should have been watchful. But the shepherd went out because of his gracious nature. And so does our God seek the salvation of lost souls.

The subject of the grace of God does not have the wonderful appeal today in our modern world that it has had in times past. The reason is because very few lost souls know and believe they are lost and in danger of an eternal hell. The philosophy of, "I'm OK and you're OK" has permeated every facet of society. Few fear the judgment because they do not recognize their sin problem. The apostle Paul wrote, "Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men" (2 Cor. 5:11). That was his motivation to travel the width and breadth of the Roman Empire to announce the good news of the Gospel. He proclaimed Christ as the Savior—the Savior from sins that they learned from Paul they were committing. When they were convinced that they were lost, they would earnestly seek the Savior's gracious gift of salvation.

Herein is the problem of our day. Karl Menninger asked the question thirty years ago, "Whatever became of sin?" The word sin has become lost from public and private discourse. The world now hears of a Savior who will save us from stress, a poor self-image, and poverty. He is declared as the "Great Assistant in the Sky," Who lives to cater to our every need. "He exists for us," people are told. There is a time coming when the teeming masses of humanity will realize that we exist for Him and He has prepared an eternal bode for those who wanted to be in His fold during their earthly lives. That must be our message. But before we will take it and seek the lost, we must first believe it ourselves.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin beautifully portray the love our Heavenly Father

has for us and for every soul that exists. When souls are lost, the very heart of God is grieved, knowing the end result of those not brought to the fold. Our God is not a respecter of persons. His love is no greater for the rich than it is for the poor, for the educated over the uneducated, for men over women, or for free men over those in bondage. And if we would want to be with the Creator and Sustainer of Life throughout eternity, we must strive to be like Him, to have His love for souls.

What bothers us today? Do we worry and fret when we have lost a needed tool around the house, or a ball game, or a wallet, and then show little, if any, concern for a lost brother that used to sit on the other end of the pew from us? Are we willing to look for some who have left the fold because they are well known and of influence in the community, but unwilling to seek the soul of others because they seem so different in age, dress, or personality? The apostle Paul exhorted the Corinthian Christians to “have the same care one for another” (1 Cor. 12:25). Does this verse still apply today?

The Hebrews writer reminds us that “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31). But to have salvation and to live with the hope of heaven are wonderful indeed. Jesus asked, “For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matt. 16:26). We answer that question every day by the decisions we make and by the souls that we seek. May the Lord God raise up a people who want to be like Him!

Endnotes

1 Donald Guthrie, **Jesus the Messiah** (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1972), p. 213.

2 Terry Varner, “The Lost Sheep,” **The Parables of Our Saviour**, ed. Fred Davis, Garfield Heights Lectureship (Lebanon, TN: Sain Publications, 1983), p. 296.

3 Charles Hodge, **Will God Run?** (Dallas: Christian Publishing Company, 1965), p. 13.

4 W. Gaddys Roy, **Sermon Outlines on the Parables of Jesus** (Montgomery: Alabama Christian College, 1963), p. 62.

5 John McArthur, Jr., **The McArthur New Testament Commentary: Matthew 16-23** (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), pp. 120-121.

6 Neil Lightfoot, **Lessons From the Parables** (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1965). p. 117.

7 William Taylor, **The Parables of Our Saviour** (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1975), p. 320.

8 Hodge, pp. 87-90.

CHAPTER 27

The Parables Of Counting The Cost

Kevin Beard

Introduction

F*IRST-CENTURY JEWS HEARD* many different men teach the Law of God. The scribes studied the Law and taught it to the people, yet their teaching did not compare with Jesus' teaching. Upon Jesus' completion of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew said, "And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine: For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (Matt. 7:28-29).¹ How thrilling it must have been to sit at the feet of Jesus to listen to Him teach!

One of the things that set Jesus apart as the Master Teacher was His use of parables. Though these stories were simple, they cut to the heart of the issue. With parables Jesus showed the danger of covetousness and the folly of relying on this world's goods (Luke 12:16-21); He illustrated the undying nature of God's love and forgiveness (15:11-32); He demonstrated the magnitude of God's forgiveness and of man's responsibility to forgive (Matt. 18:21-35).

Multitudes of people were blessed to hear the beautiful voice of Jesus, yet how many of those multitudes actually heeded the things Jesus said? Sadly, many of those

who were privileged to hear the Savior speak turned away from Him because His teachings were too hard for them. After one of these sessions of teaching “hard sayings,” John said, “From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him” (John 6:66). Many teachers would be disturbed by this kind of response, but not Jesus. He did not soften His teaching to satisfy the shallow desires of those who could not tolerate the truth. Those who wish to follow Jesus must do so on His terms, and they must understand those terms at the outset. Jesus showed the significance of this in His parables of counting the cost (Luke 14:28-33).

The Context Of The Parables

Parables are not disjointed stories told on a whim, but teaching tools told specifically to deal with a particular circumstance. To understand a parable properly, one must understand the context in which it is found. By understanding the events surrounding the parable’s telling, the student can ascertain the specific problem that caused Jesus to tell the parable. By taking this approach to studying the parables, Bible students can avoid misapplying the things Jesus said, especially when the Lord Himself gave no application of the parable.

Jesus was entering a Pharisee’s house to eat a meal on the Sabbath day when He told the parables of counting the cost. Everything He said and everything He did on this occasion were to challenge the people’s thinking regarding the importance of self in serving God. By healing a paralyzed man, He challenged their self-righteous attitude regarding their tradition of what was lawful and what was not on the Sabbath (Luke 14:2-6). Seeing their selfishness, in choosing for themselves the places of greatest honor, He told a parable that emphasized the need for humility (14:7-11) and then warned His host about

preparing feasts only for those who will return the favor (14:12-14). It seems that one of the guests was perhaps growing uncomfortable with Jesus' topics of discussion, and, upon hearing the mention of a feast and the resurrection of the just, decided to change the subject to the blessings of the kingdom. But even in this attempt to discuss other matters, this man demonstrated his selfish preoccupation with what great blessings the Jews would receive in the kingdom. According to Barnes:

The Jews supposed that (the Messiah) would be a temporal prince, and that his reign would be one of great magnificence and splendour. They supposed that the **Jews** then would be delivered from all their oppressions, and that, from being a degraded people, they would become the most distinguished and happy nation of the earth....The Jews **only**, he expected, would partake of those blessings.²

In spite of this interjection, Jesus still emphasized the need for humility and submission to God by telling the parable of the great supper (Luke 14:15-24). Receiving the blessings of God and the kingdom requires self-sacrifice, not selfishness, nor self-righteousness. Followers of Christ must understand this before making the commitment to follow Him; hence, Jesus told the parables of counting the cost.

The Parables

If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is

not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him, Saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish. Or what king, going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and consulteth whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is yet a great way off, he sendeth an ambassage, and desireth conditions of peace. So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:26-33).

Following Jesus requires a great price to be paid by the follower. Jesus wants all men to understand that such a price is required, and He wants all men to be sure they are willing to pay that price before they make the decision to follow Him. To illustrate the point Jesus told two parables. The first is about a man who planned to build a tower. Since this is an individual who planned to build this tower, Jesus probably had in mind the kinds of towers built in connection with vineyards. It seems to have been a common thing for landowners to build towers in their vineyards (Isa. 5:1-2; Matt. 21:33; Mark 12:1). According to Smith, "Such towers are still in use in Palestine in vineyards, especially near Hebron, and are used as lodges for the keepers of the vineyards."³ Perhaps this was the purpose of the towers in Jesus' day, too. This seems reasonable when examining the parables recorded in Matthew 21 and Mark 12. In those parables, the husbandmen had a place to stay in the vineyard and a place from which they could see people approaching the vineyard. A tower would have served both of these purposes. Such a tower would have been a financial asset to the owner of the vineyard. It would allow him to hire men to care for the vineyard so that he could apply himself elsewhere. However, since the landowner did not have sufficient funds to complete the construction of his tower, he could build

no more than the foundation. This subjected him not only to the loss of funds required to lay the foundation, but also to the ridicule of all who passed by and saw the unfinished tower as a monument to his lack of planning. This is the reason Jesus said no one builds a tower without first calculating the cost.

In the second parable, Jesus said that kings consider the strength of their armies before entering into war. Intelligence gathering has been a priority for nations probably for as long as one nation has threatened the sovereignty of another. Governmental leaders want to know all they can about the activities, strength, and tactics of their neighbors so they can be prepared for any contingency. So, they exert much effort to learn these things about their enemies. But think of the foolishness of a king who would lead his army of ten thousand men into battle, not knowing if his troops were of sufficient strength to have a chance to repel the oncoming attack. If a king in those days were to make such a foolish decision, he would risk the loss of his soldiers and likely his, and his country's, freedom. Instead, Jesus said the king who knows his armies are outnumbered seeks for a truce while the attacking armies are yet a long way off.

Both of these parables illustrate the importance of planning ahead and making decisions based upon good information. If a landowner desires to build a tower that will cost a certain amount of money, but he does not have that much money, he will not build the tower. If a king faces an attack from an oncoming army of twenty thousand soldiers when his own army has only ten thousand soldiers, that king will seek a peaceful resolution instead. Though their intentions may be good and though the intended outcome may be worthwhile, if they do not have the ability to realize their goals, they will suffer if they try to

accomplish those goals in spite of their shortcomings. Jesus said that being His disciple is the same way.

The Application Of The Parables

A good point to remember when studying Jesus' parables is that He had one main point to make in telling the story. That one main point is usually seen in studying the context and noticing what it was that prompted Jesus to tell the story in the first place. Once the student ascertains Jesus' purpose, he can make proper applications of the parable's teaching.

The Pharisees had many spiritual problems, not the least of which was over-emphasizing their own importance. Jesus saw the opportunity to address this character flaw in healing a man on the Sabbath. The Pharisees had already criticized Him for healing on the Sabbath (Luke 13:10-17), but Jesus showed that their criticism on that occasion had been motivated by selfish pride. At least two things contributed to their criticism of Jesus on that occasion: they took great pride in their traditional interpretation of the law, and they had no compassion on the woman who needed help. Jesus' response to their criticism exposed both of these flaws:

Thou hypocrite, doth not each one of you on the sabbath loose his ox or his ass from the stall, and lead him away to watering? And ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan hath bound, lo, these eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the sabbath day? (13:15-16).

Their selfishness and pride showed in their hypocritical interpretation of the law and in their lack of concern for the needs of someone other than themselves. As result of this response, Jesus' critics were ashamed. Now in Luke 14, Jesus brings up the question of healing

on the Sabbath again. He knew the Pharisees were watching Him. Thayer says the word translated “watched” (**paratereo**) means, “to stand beside and watch; to watch assiduously, observe carefully;...contextually in a bad sense, to watch insidiously.”⁴ So it seems that the Pharisees were looking for an opportunity to criticize Him again, perhaps even having set up the situation by placing the man with dropsy there. They showed their selfishness and pride by attempting to make Jesus look foolish in the eyes of the people. They also demonstrated their selfishness and pride by choosing for themselves the places of greatest honor at the dinner. And so on this occasion Jesus seized the opportunity to address the Pharisees’ chief problem: a prideful sense of self-righteousness and self-importance. This sect of the Jews prided themselves in being the ones most committed to keeping the Law of God perfectly, yet Jesus pointed out that to be a true servant of God requires self-denial, not self-promotion.

Having addressed the Pharisees’ problem, Jesus next turned His attention to the crowds that were following Him. The Pharisees presented themselves as the standard of excellence in serving God, but now that Jesus has refuted that idea, He begins to show the people what serving God really requires. Anyone who comes to Christ must hate his father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, and his own life (Luke 14:26). These sound like harsh words from Jesus. Some modern speech versions of the Bible soften Jesus’ statement by rephrasing it, “you must love me more than your own father and mother,”⁵ but Jesus did use the word “hate.” Of course, He spoke figuratively; He would never command us literally to hate anyone. He intended to show by these words how serious a matter it is to love Him supremely. In some extreme cases, Christians have been forced to choose between Christ and their families, or even their lives. Had Jesus merely said, “love me more

than them,” the decision might have been less clear. But since He said to hate them, there is no doubt that the Lord meant that His followers must choose Him above everything else in the world. Obviously, circumstances do not always require Christians to make such choices literally. However, the allegiance must be the same, regardless of what the circumstances of life dictate. This is no optional matter. It is not a possibility about which Christians are merely to speculate when they are not faced with making the literal choice. Each follower of Christ must make this choice. If he does not, Jesus said, “he cannot be my disciple.” So the cost of discipleship is quite high, and the Lord is serious about that. Jesus wanted His hearers to understand these things. In effect, He was saying, “If you are contemplating becoming my disciple, this is what you must do. Are you sure you are willing to make that decision?”

Understanding the purpose of the parable makes applying it much easier. The parables of building the tower and of the king going to war demonstrate at least three qualities Christians will possess when they pay the price to follow Christ.

Self-Sacrifice

There is a price to be paid in following Jesus. The two men in the parables understood that they had to pay a price to accomplish their goals. No tower could be built without spending money, and no battle could be won without sending troops into war. In the same way, no one can become a follower of Christ without paying the price of self-sacrifice.

But to what extent should this self-sacrifice go? Webster’s definition should help to clarify the issue: “destruction or surrender of something for the sake of something else...something given up or lost.”⁶ When

something is sacrificed, it is given up completely. Thus, to sacrifice self means to give up oneself completely to the will of Christ. Jesus made this point very clear. As noted above, He demanded that His followers hate even their own lives. But He also emphasized the completeness of the self-sacrifice in other passages. Jesus said, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Matt. 16:24). Notice two things about this statement.

First, Jesus said that if one will come after Him he must "deny himself." The word translated "deny" (**aparneomai**) is used fourteen times, but in only three different circumstances in the New Testament: the occasion cited above (Matt. 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23), the warning to Peter about his denial of Christ (Matt. 26:34-35, 75; Mark 14:30-31, 72; Luke 22:34, 61; John 13:38), and Jesus' teaching that whoever denies Him will be denied in heaven (Luke 12:9). The word means "to deny utterly, to abjure, to affirm that one has no connection with a person."⁷ Jesus said that Peter would deny Him, and Peter did so three times. His denial intensified each time. First, he simply denied knowing Jesus; next he denied with an oath; finally he cursed and swore that he did not know Jesus. Peter wanted to make it perfectly clear to those people that he had absolutely no connection with Jesus. This was the kind of denial Jesus foretold. Jesus also used this word to describe what would happen to those who deny Him before men: "But he that denieth me before men shall be denied before the angels of God" (Luke 12:9). That denial, too, will be an utter denial. Those people will hear the Lord say to them, "I never knew you: depart from me" (Matt. 7:23). The force of this word should impress upon potential disciples the extent of the self-sacrifice Jesus has in mind. This denying of self is not a mere limitation of self-interest; it is a complete rejection of all self-will. Thayer

points out that in this context the word means “to forget one’s self, lose sight of one’s self and one’s own interests.”⁸

Second, Jesus said one must “take up his cross” to follow Him. The concept of bearing a cross has come to mean bearing a burden. The picture of Jesus carrying His cross through the streets of Jerusalem can be a vivid one in the mind of the Christian. While it is true that followers of the Lord must bear the burdens of life (Gal. 6:5), is this all there is to Jesus’ instructions for His followers to “take up the cross”? Think about that command as one who lived in the first century might have thought of it. Why did men carry crosses then? So they could be executed. Why did Jesus carry His cross? So He could be executed. A cross was not a religious symbol to the people Jesus addressed in that day; it was a symbol of death. The self-sacrifice necessary in following Christ is so complete that Jesus compared it to an execution. Is it any wonder then, that Paul said, “I am crucified with Christ” (2:20)? So, the child of God must view himself as being dead, yet living for Christ:

How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? (Rom. 6:2).

For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God (Col. 3:3).

The price to pay in order to follow Jesus is quite high. Some might think it is too high, but what about the alternative? Jesus said, “For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matt. 16:26). To give up a life for self on earth in exchange for a life with God in heaven is the best bargain anyone will ever find.

Commitment

True self-sacrifice results in commitment because self-sacrifice is more than giving up self; it is giving up

self for **Christ**. His followers gladly lay down their lives, but they do that for His cause. They remove self from the throne room of their lives and put Jesus there. Commitment results. Now these people have a new reason for living; they live for Christ and for no one else.

This kind of commitment has a powerful effect on people's lives. It enables them to endure many things and to look at life from a completely different perspective. The person who lacks such commitment to the Lord sees his life in light of himself and what he can gain in this life. Whether pleasure, power, or wealth motivate him, he generally does whatever will bring him the things he desires. But when one has committed himself to Christ's cause, he sees his life in light of Christ. When the Lord's cause motivates him, he does whatever will bring success for the Lord, not for self. Paul illustrated that principle beautifully. Because he had crucified himself so that Christ could live in him (Gal. 2:20), he was able to see that his own suffering contributed to the furtherance of the gospel. He wrote the book of Philippians while in prison. But instead of feeling sorry for himself, he comforted his friends in Philippi by showing them that he was merely a tool for the Lord to use in accomplishing His goal. He told them that some were preaching the Gospel, hoping that their preaching would increase his suffering (Phil. 1:14-16). Did he take offense at their action? Did he condemn their obvious hypocrisy? Did he wish for God to send some punishment their way? No. He **rejoiced!** He said, "What then? notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice" (1:18). That Christ was preached was of utmost importance in Paul's life. His personal circumstances were inconsequential.

All of Jesus' followers need the same kind of commitment. When Christ comes first in the Christian's

life, then the Christian will see that his life, like Paul's, is merely the Lord's tool. So then, every aspect of his life is devoted to bringing glory to the Lord. Each facet of serving Jesus becomes a joy. Instead of seeing how close he can get to sin without actually sinning, he will see how far he can separate himself from sin. Instead of trying to blend in with the world, he will come out and be separate (2 Cor. 6:17; Eph. 5:11).

Perseverance

These parables also suggest that the follower of Christ must pay the price of perseverance. A man who decided to build a tower needed perseverance to finish the job. If he decided to begin the project, he could not quit part of the way through because he grew tired or bored with it. A king who decided to go to war had to fight till the end. He could not decide to quit in the middle of the action, because his enemy would surely press the battle, regardless of his desire to bring his troops home.

Choosing to follow Jesus has lifelong ramifications; His disciples must not give up before the end. In the parable of the sower, Jesus showed that believing and obeying the Gospel is not enough. Two different classes of people did that, yet they did not persevere. One class of people fell away in time of temptation (Luke 8:13); the other class brought no fruit to perfection because they were choked by the cares of this life (8:14). In both cases their acceptance of the Word meant nothing in the end.

Such perseverance that is necessary to follow Christ requires diligent effort. Regardless of the circumstances one faces, he must never give up. The New Testament encourages the Christian to remain faithful and to be diligent in service through difficulties as well as through good times. The people of Israel provoked God to anger because they did not remain steadfast in their faith but

rebelled against Him. Because of this, God said, “They shall not enter into my rest” (Heb. 3:11). With that warning Christians are told, “For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence stedfast unto the end” (3:14). There is no gain in giving up. Temptation and trial help to perfect the Christian (Jas. 1:2-3), but only if he faces them with steadfastness and determination to remain faithful through the ordeal. The Lord’s people should expect difficulty in their quest to be faithful, whether that difficulty takes the form of temptation, trial of faith, or persecution. Paul told the Philippians, “For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake” (Phil. 1:29). Along with faith comes suffering for the cause, and Christians must persevere; that is part of the price to be paid to follow Jesus.

Conclusion

Jesus’ parables had a way of preserving His poignant message. Simply by recalling the story Jesus told, Christians can remember the truth presented by that story. When Jesus’ followers think of a man who contemplates a building project or a king who considers sending troops into battle, they can remember that, just as those actions require first considering their cost, so does following Jesus. The prospective disciple must ponder whether he is willing to sacrifice himself for Christ’s cause, to commit himself to putting Jesus first in everything he does, and to remain true to that commitment for the rest of his life, regardless of the difficulties that result from that decision.

The Lord expects His followers first to consider the cost of following Him. He cannot use people who are unwilling to devote their entire lives to serving Him. To follow Christ, one must give up absolutely everything for Him. The cost is great, but the rewards are far greater.

Endnotes

1 All Scripture quotations are from the King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

2 Albert Barnes, "Luke and John," **Notes on the New Testament Explanatory and Practical**, ed. Robert Frew (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 96, emp. in the original.

3 William Smith, "Tower," **Smith's Bible Dictionary** (New York: New Family Library, 1972), p. 710.

4 Joseph Henry Thayer, **Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament** (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), p. 486.

5 **Holy Bible, New Living Translation** (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1996). See also, **Holy Bible, Contemporary English Version** (New York: American Bible Society, 1995); **The Word, New Century Version** (Fort Worth, TX: Sweet Publishing, 1984).

6 **Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary** (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1989), s.v. "sacrifice."

7 W. E. Vine, **Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words** (Iowa Falls, IA: World Bible Publishers, 1981), p. 292.

8 Thayer, p. 54.

CHAPTER 28

The Parable Of The Prodigal Son

Curtis Cates

Introduction

ONE OF THE MOST powerful techniques of the Master Teacher was the use of parables. He took earthly objects, events, and situations and taught profound lessons of a spiritual nature. He moved from the **concrete** to the **abstract**, from the **known** to the **unknown**. Jesus, the Christ, took His auditors from where they were in understanding as far as He could, as far as they would allow, and as long as they would listen and give heed. His powerful sermons would not have been complete sans the parable of the prodigal son, which is recorded in Luke 15:11-32.

This parable follows two others dealing with why God's people become lost. First, the parable of the lost sheep (15:3-7) pictures one who is lost because of the carelessness of oneself, in wandering from the fold. Second, the parable of the lost coin (15:8-10) pictures one who is lost because of the carelessness of others. Third, the parable of the lost son (15:11-24) pictures one who is lost because of deliberate and outright rebellion and disobedience. Fourth, the elder brother of the prodigal (15:25-32) pictures one who is lost because of a sinful, selfish, legalistic disposition. Each of these demonstrates most vividly the huge, forgiving, loving heart of Almighty God, willing and deeply desirous to

forgive all who will repent. This great chapter is really an illustration of one of the most beloved verses in all of Holy Writ, called the “Golden Text of the Bible,” John 3:16. It has been described as the “Gospel in miniature.” Chapter fifteen of Luke, especially the parable of the precious lost boy, stands as one of the pinnacles of God’s inerrant Word. Important to an understanding of these parables is a study of chapters 13-14, 16-19, wherein this section deals with self-righteousness and with the necessity of repentance. Some appropriate verses to contemplate are as follows:

I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all in like manner perish (13:3, 5)¹;

For everyone that exalteth himself shall be humbled; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted (14:11);

And they all with one consent began to make excuse (14:18);

Now all the publicans and sinners were drawing near unto him to hear him. And both the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them (15:1-2);

If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? (16:11);

And he said unto them, Ye are they that justify yourselves in the sight of men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God (16:15);

And he spake also this parable unto certain who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and set all others at nought (18:9);

And he cried, saying, Jesus, thou son of David, have mercy on me. And they that went before

rebuked him, that he should hold his peace: but he cried out the more a great deal, Thou son of David, have mercy on me (18:38-39).

Indeed, the parable of the prodigal son is universally loved and tremendously thought-provoking and deeply moving to those who take seriously its many principles and who imbibe its hope.

The prodigal son learned many things—often shocking things—the hard way. Our Lord no doubt delivered this parable and it is recorded so that we would not personally, experientially have to learn these serious, soul-threatening, spiritually life-and-death principles and truths. It is much better to learn from the bitter, disastrous mistakes and sins of others rather than to experience them ourselves. The “school of hard knocks” is often a severe teacher.

The thrust of this chapter will be to examine the condition of the younger brother at home, his departure into a far country, the despicable degradation and ruin in the far country of sin, the renewal of his right mind and return home, his unbelievably warm reception by the father, and the anger of the older brother upon the prodigal’s return. This study will be developed by contemplating certain surprises experienced by the prodigal.² One’s experience with Satan, the great deceiver, and with the deceitfulness of sin is traumatic, both in this life and (if persisted in) in the life to come!

Leaving Home

For a first thing, the prodigal son must have been deeply surprised how easy it was to leave home and leave his father:

And he said, A certain man had two sons: and the younger of them said to his father, Father,

give me the portion of thy substance that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living. And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together and took his journey into a far country (15:11-13a).

Really, we are surprised that he would desire to leave home, are we not? What would possess a young man to want to leave such a loving, devoted father, no doubt a wealthy situation in a beautiful mansion, a family where there was much money to be divided, where there were fields to be cultivated and grazing lands, where there were servants, where the inhabitants were clothed in costly garments and wore precious gems. What more could one's heart desire? **But**, the younger of two sons made this demand! He called for what would come to him in the inheritance, one third of his father's goods; the older brother would get two-thirds, according to the Law of Moses (Deut. 21:17). Compare the attitude and request of the younger brother with that of the covetous person in Luke 12:13. But would the father divide with the younger son and allow him to receive his request and to leave home?

The father could not refuse his son's request, and this must have surprised the young man. Human beings are created in God's image (Gen. 1:26), which includes the great characteristic of free moral agency. No beast of the field is called a son or child of God, for they do not have immortal natures—souls. There are certain things which even God cannot do, for they are self-contradictory. Examples would include His making a square circle, or His making a spirit out of matter. Just so, God cannot impinge upon man's free will. God could have chosen not to have created beings in His image (angels and human beings), but having chosen to create them thus, He could not/cannot violate man's (or angels') free will. He could not keep certain of the angels from being lifted up with

pride and rebelling; He likewise could not keep Adam and Eve from sin, else He would have made them mere beasts, animals, robots—not in His image. Note such scriptures as Joshua 24:15; John 6:66-68; Luke 6:46; John 12:48; Matthew 11:26-28; Acts 2:40; 13:46; Revelation 3:20; 22:14, 17; et al. The younger son reached the decision that he was not going to listen any longer to his father (illustrative of Jehovah God). He did not any longer wish to abide by the rules of home, which rules themselves helped make home what it was, with its blessings, love, devotion, security, etc. He would direct his own steps (but see Jer. 10:23), he would be independent, he would be told by no one, he would seek his own way, and, as has been the saying, “do his own thing.” He had the mentality that characterizes all too many young people—and older people also. Often it has been heard, “I am going to sow my wild oats!” I am going to liberate myself from my father, he resolved.

The father did the only thing he could do: “he divided unto them his living.” What pleadings did the father give, what warning did he set forth, what grabbing the arm and begging to stay? The sacred text does not record these matters. It is easy for the Christian’s love to grow cold and for him to depart from the faith, is it not? It was easy for Adam and Eve to fall from grace; it was easy for Judas to betray the Master, as well as for Demas to return to the world. In fact, it is shockingly easy, just as it is easy for young people to depart from the wise counsel of their parents who love them so very much! But the prodigal is selfish; it matters little to him what are the rules of home and whether he breaks his father’s heart. He is unhappy; he wants a “big time.” He certainly had not learned, as Paul, “in whatsoever state I am, therein to be content” (Phil. 4:11), or, as Timothy, “but having food and covering we shall be therewith content” (1 Tim. 6:8). He had much more than that, and yet threw it all away! He was like Israel of

old: "For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water" (Jer. 2:13).

Drifting Away

For a second thing, **the prodigal son must have been surprised how easy it was to drift away from his father.** It has been said that the child of God who returns into sin does not do so all of a sudden, but over time. The Divine record says that, "not many days after," he departed for the far country. His love had been growing cold. He asked for a separation of "what falleth to me" from what was his father's, a great change in attitude. He seemed to lose his faith in God's ability to handle what the son considered his own substance. When does a person depart from God? Sometimes to set an exact point of separation is difficult: "Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things that were heard, lest haply we drift away from them" (Heb. 2:1). When does a young person lose faith in his or her parents, or when does one determine to live in rebellion to their leadership? When does the Christian's love grow cold, and he or she apostatize? Is it when the child of God no longer hungers and thrills to hear the Gospel message? Or when one's giving is begrudged? Or when it gets increasingly hard to get up in time for Bible study on Sunday morning or to return on Wednesday night? Drifting is a serious matter, and often a child of God is surprised when his love has grown cold. Soon, the prodigal is with seemingly no compunction of conscience, rejecting his father's love and advice completely and gleefully departing into the far country.

Failing To Listen To God

For a third thing, **the prodigal son must have been surprised how many dangers were lurking for**

him when he refused to listen to his father. When he refused to listen to his father, he gave heed to the voices of the world. John wrote, “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15). Further, he was easily deceived. The pleasures of sin are but for a season; then payday comes. How often are young persons (and sometimes older ones alike) deceived by alcohol, thinking they can drown their troubles; by tobacco, thinking they can calm their nerves and be “grownups”; etc.

Even further, the decisions he made were motivated by the flesh. The spirit is in control only when one listens to the voice of God. Man cannot direct his own life (Jer. 10:23). The son was protected against the wiles of the devil and the destructive nature of the world only while at home with the father. When Eve decided not to heed the Father’s voice, the flesh took over:

And 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 to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat; and she gave also unto her husband with her, and he did eat (Gen. 3:6).

each man is tempted, when he is drawn away by his own lust, and enticed. Then the lust, when it hath conceived, beareth sin: and the sin, when it is full grown, bringeth forth death. Be not deceived, my beloved brethren (Jas. 1:14-16).

Still further, the prodigal began thinking he knew more than his father. At home, there were rules and regulations based upon truth and right, morality and ethics. There were freedom and protection. Freedom, whether political or religious, is always based upon law. Otherwise, there are inevitable anarchy and slavery. When he abandoned the rules at home and began refusing to

heed the father's will, he elevated his own thoughts, knowledge, and wisdom above that of the father's. How often that happens as young people leave and abandon home today! Eve thought she knew more than God; imagine her having thought she had more wisdom than the omniscient Father and Creator. One's parents have lived much longer and have gained wisdom from God (if they are Christians), as well as having themselves experienced growing up. For a child to think he or she knows more than parents is folly. The prodigal son was laying down a pattern for disaster.

Hitting Rock Bottom

For a fourth thing, the prodigal son must have been surprised how quickly he lost all that he was and had:

and there he wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that country; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine (Luke 15:13b-15).

Please notice that he was now in a "far" country: far from his father, far from others who loved him, far from loving restraints. He had excitedly taken his leave from home; now he would yield to fleshly appetite, to lusts which very often unmercifully carry a soul to depths he never imagined. There is, when one is led by fleshly lust, no stopping place. Cain departed from the presence of God into the far-distant country of Nod. In the far-off country, the prodigal would put as many miles as possible between him and his father, forgetting his father's house and all restraints, and far from his dear father's face and watchful eye. He now had his "freedom"; he could now sow his wild

oats; he was finally making his own rules and casting off all restrictions. His companions are worldly and lustful and wicked; there is no honoring of the sacred and the moral, no affection for the divine and sublime.

He is finally happy. The pleasure of sin “will not end”; he goes through life only once and, therefore, goes for all the gusto he can. He eats, drinks, and is merry! He can “live it up” with his friends. He does not have to listen to his father’s advice; he does not look upon the tearful glance of disappointment of the one who loves him more than anyone else possibly could. “There is no place like home,” but he has abandoned home.

Now, free from all constraints, he spends his living like there is no tomorrow. He is sowing to the flesh (Gal. 6:7-8). He is fulfilling the lust of the flesh; the flesh has become his master. He is traveling headlong into inevitable and unspeakable ruin. He is well described by Paul in Colossians 1:21, “alienated and enemies in your mind in your evil works,” experiencing personally, and firsthand, the warning to Christians by the apostle Paul in Romans 8:13, “for if ye live after the flesh, ye must die,” and that of Solomon in Proverbs 14:12, “There is a way which seemeth right unto a man; But the end thereof are the ways of death.” He had no use for such warnings as:

The fear of Jehovah is the beginning of knowledge; But the foolish despise wisdom and instruction. My son, hear the instruction of thy father, And forsake not the law of thy mother (Prov. 1:7-8).

The prodigal son spent all; he became utterly destitute in the slavery and degradation of sin; he was now under the ownership of Satan, and Satan is a cruel taskmaster. His older brother stated that the prodigal had “devoured thy living with harlots” (Luke 15:30), and there

is nothing in the Lord's words to indicate otherwise. Nothing was held back; he had "gathered all," and he is now destitute. Having carried all into the far country, he had nothing which ensured his return home. He had certainly taken the low road to destruction; rebellion and its fruits are not pretty: "Whoso loveth wisdom rejoiceth his father; But he that keepeth company with harlots wasteth his substance" (Prov. 29:3; cf. 5:1-6,15-23; 6:23-35; 7:5-23; et al.). His spiritual and financial poverty and ruin came quickly. How little did he appreciate what he had at home; he knew not the value of money nor of character. This ruin of body and soul could not happen to him, not to someone from his family. But the care received at home is nothing like the lack of care in the dog-eat-dog world! He was now a physical and spiritual degenerate; he greatly underestimated the cruelty of the Devil's realm!

Receiving No Help Or Rescue

For a fifth thing, **the prodigal son must have been surprised when he was totally abandoned by his friends, and no one came to his assistance.** In the far country, one has friends only as long as his money holds out and as long as he can show them a good time: "And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him" (Luke 15:16). It is not anticipated, but "a mighty famine" always seems to arise when one is out of money, out of resources; it was totally unexpected by the prodigal. While he was "riding high," it never entered his mind. He never pictured himself as utterly penniless, destroyed, and helpless. What a contrast to the royalty and plenty of home! But the farther into the far country, the more insecure and destitute spiritually, ethically, and morally one becomes!

And the same selfishness and pleasure-mad mania which characterized him when leaving his father would

characterize all his temporary worldly companions. With them, they had no use for being a friend in need (thus, a friend indeed)! His former companions (as he) were of their father, the Devil, who is the arch-friend of selfishness. They had reveled in his abundance, they had drunk his liquor, they had played the harlot with him—as long as he could pay. Now he is completely alone, with no one to help comfort him in his misery.

The truth is, often when one hits rock bottom, and he is in the ditch and the cesspool of iniquity, destitute and hopeless, others will often kick him again and push him further down—for the very reason that he got himself there in the first place. The young man must have been surprised that his “friends” had now abandoned him when he was hungering nearly to death. The desperation of the prodigal was seen in the fact that he, a Jew to whom swine were unclean flesh, was now reduced to the hog pen feeding them. What a contrast this was to his submission earlier to the father at home! He longed to fill his empty stomach with pig food, the seed pods of the carob tree (the seeds themselves were inedible) rarely eaten by human beings. When God’s people bow to serving Satan, it eventuates in deep humiliation and will destroy one’s eternal soul in hell (Rom. 6:23).

Being Abundantly Forgiven

For a sixth thing, the prodigal son was surprised that his father received him back:

But when he came to himself he said, How many hired servants of my father’s have bread enough and to spare, and I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight: I am no more worthy to be called your son: make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose, and came to his father. But while

he was yet afar off, his father saw him, and was moved with compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight: I am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: and bring the fatted calf, and kill it, and let us eat, and make merry: for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry (Luke 15:17-24).

There were but two things the prodigal could do “flat on his back” in the insanity of sin and degradation: he could continue in rebellion, transgression, and abject misery leading to starvation and death, or he could humble himself and return to his right mind. The son had been telling himself lies since before he left home; in his desperation, he finally told himself the truth. He had preached to himself that life is composed of “give me” (15:12), that **things** were his most valuable possession [but see the parable of the rich farmer (12:15)], that he knew more than his father, that life is to be lived in selfishness, and that the rules of home are old-fashioned and keep one from enjoying life. He now would have the right spiritual mind of “make me” (15:19). He was now characterized by godly sorrow that he had sinned against all that is right and against a loving, sacrificial father. He learned that he was inadequate to make his own decisions and direct his own paths (Jer. 10:23). Finally, he would have the attitude that should have characterized him from the beginning: “I thought on my ways, And turned my feet unto thy testimonies. I made haste, and delayed not, To observe thy commandments” (Psm. 119:59-60). He had to humble himself as a little child (Matt. 18:3); he had to become “poor in spirit” (5:3). He had to swallow his pride—what little, if any, he had remaining, for the Devil had brought him to

desperation; he faced up to reality. What he had done in leaving home and wasting himself was exceedingly sorrowful; however, for him not to have faced up to, admitted, determined to rectify his grievous sins would have been eternally disastrous.

One of the most powerful influences upon the prodigal, leading to his resolutions to return to his father, was his memory of “Home, sweet home.” He had experienced a very pleasant, warm, safe, and loving childhood. He remembered the great abundance at home, but he was perishing. He remembered the hugs and smiles of his dear father, and there he never lacked for love and encouragement. Every need was realized, and the companionship was indescribable. He essentially thought, “What a fool I have been!” He realized that his sin had affected others. Some have the erroneous impression that one’s sin affects only oneself; nothing could be farther from the truth. It broke the huge heart of his father, and it destroyed many loving relationships. Think of how many persons David’s sin with Bathsheba influenced. Joseph refused to commit adultery with Potiphar’s wife. It would have been a horrible thing for Potiphar’s family, and especially against God. Joseph asked, “how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” (Gen. 39:9). When a person departs into error and immorality, he sins against everything that is decent and right, and it also has consequences against himself, his family, his community, his brethren in Christ, society, and heaven. “No man is an island.”

Would his father receive him back? He did not know, but he said, “I’m going back home. I’m tired of this hog pen. I will confess my sin in deep contrition. I have no basis upon which to ask anything.” He had absolutely no standing to claim; his father owed him nothing! If his father would come with outright rejection, he would have no room

to argue or protest. He would throw himself upon the mercy of his father and request humbly to be treated as a “hired servant,” a step lower than a slave, for such a hired servant could be let go at a whim. His plea is powerfully expressed by Augustus M. Toplady, 1776, in “**Rock of Ages**”:

Nothing in my hand I bring; Simply to Thy cross
I cling.
Naked, come to Thee for dress; Helpless look to
thee for grace;
Vile, I to the fountain fly: Wash me, Savior, or
I die.

His resolution was not empty: “And he arose and came to his father.” He did not have a dead faith; he went back home. His attitude was “I will,” and **he did!** The impenitent, on the other hand, says, “I will not.” A persistently stubborn, prideful attitude has never gotten anyone back home! In the prodigal’s return, one sees clearly God’s definition of repentance: (1) godly sorrow (Matt. 5:4); (2) a change of mind and purpose of heart (2 Cor. 7:10); and (3) the departure from sin and return to God (reformation of life). Note that neither his godly sorrow nor his change of mind restored him to his home. Restoration took place when **he acted** upon his resolution! Note also that the prodigal would not try to rationalize his sin, blame it on someone else, or explain it away!

Yes indeed, the prodigal was surprised at his father’s reaction. Unbeknownst to the prodigal, his father had been constantly wishing for his return and looking down the road for his return ever since he left home. This is demonstrated by the fact that he ran to meet the son while the son “was yet afar off.” A father with that dedication to a lost child, that loving, that sacrificing, does not have to be begged to forgive a mourning penitent!! The father’s “compassion” caused him to **run** to the son, to embrace him with deep emotion, and to kiss him. This was **his boy**;

the prodigal was learning what grace (unmerited favor) really means. His grace was not available as long as the son was in rebellion in the far country of sin, but his return in penitence and faith enabled the father's grace richly to flow to him. [The Heavenly Father's grace (forgiveness) is not administered to one who persists in serving Satan in his kingdom of darkness!]

The son began his confession but was not allowed by the father to finish it; he had higher, more lofty gifts for the prodigal than he could imagine. Just a hired servant? Absolutely not! He is **immediately** and **fully** forgiven. And the instruction is for the symbols of full forgiveness and exaltation to sonship to be brought "quickly": the stately, most beautiful robe; the signet ring (his every debt of sin was paid); the shoes of a person—not a slave, since slaves went barefoot; and a fatted calf (held in preparation for the special celebration of his return). Compare this with the sinner's reconciliation to God in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:18-21). The prodigal is received by the father as if he had never left home. And the rejoicing is typical of any returning sinner: "Even so, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth" (Luke 15:10). God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit rejoice in the angels' presence, who join in with the Sacred Three. If you are in a far country, dear reader, just imagine the host of heaven awaiting your return!! This is in addition to your beloved, dear family, who are praying and pleading for you, and the Spirit and the bride (the church) who await your return (Rev. 22:17). Just imagine: the prodigal who gladly wished for the most menial position, just as long as he could be near his father once again, is fully restored to his place of honor. What amazing grace! What a Father we worship and serve!

Not Being Accepted Back

For a seventh thing, the prodigal son must have been surprised when his brother refused to receive him back:

Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called to him one of the servants, and inquired what these things might be. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. But he was angry, and would not go in: and his father came out, and entreated him. But he answered and said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, and I never transgressed a commandment of thine; and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: but when this thy son came, who hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou killedst for him the fatted calf. And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that is mine is thine. But it was meet to make merry and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found (15:25-32).

The prodigal must have been shocked that his brother was not happy to see him nor wanted to rejoice that his father had forgiven and restored him. Very regretfully, not all of God's children are merciful and forgiving. They have not deeply imbibed the Father's love and compassion, but they are rather legalistic and selfish. The music should have been a signal for the older brother to join his father, but he went, rather, to one of the servants to ask why the celebrating. Was his relationship with the father somewhat cool? The servant informed the older brother that his younger brother had returned and that it was cause for great rejoicing. The forgiveness and grace freely given the prodigal was greatly resented, and he persisted in his refusal to join the celebration.

When the father, having learned of the elder son's steadfast refusal to accept his brother's return, went out and lovingly pleaded for him to join the rejoicing, the elder son strongly reprimanded his father and had strong words of criticism of his penitent brother. The father had never ever killed a goat for him to celebrate with his friends, much less a fatted calf! The likelihood was that the other brother could have done just that, had he asked. Had his selfishness kept him from requesting it, not wishing to share what he had with others? Might this attitude have characterized the Jews, especially the self-righteous, legalistic Pharisees? Evidently, the elder brother cared nothing for his younger brother's return, nor might he have even owned up to his being his brother. His words to his father were "this thy son." The very sad truth is this: when the parable ends, the younger son is on the inside making merry with the father, and the elder brother is on the outside.

The lessons for us from the Word regarding the prodigal certainly include the following. One, love demands that we seek to do all within our power to restore the prodigal (Jas. 5:19-20). Two, when they return, love moves "quickly" to rejoice with them who are fully back into the fold of safety, lest they be overcome in great sorrow (2 Cor. 2:5-11). Those who refuse to forgive guarantee that God's grace will not flow to them (Matt. 6:14-15). The prodigal who returns will be enthusiastically received by most Christians and by God Himself.

Conclusion

As Christians, we are taught by the parable of the prodigal son that we can apostatize and that the consequences of such departure are certain and severe. Wild oats do come up—in abundance (Gal. 6:7-8). It has been correctly observed that many are praying for a crop failure. The pleasures of sin are only for a short time, a

season (Heb. 11:25). Doing right blesses both now and into eternity. The observation is also correct which says, "Sin will take you where you do not want to go, take you farther than you want to go, and keep you longer than you want to stay." In fact, unfortunately most prodigals do not return home. Their final destination is eternal destruction away from the presence of God and the heavenly home. The prodigal son stubbornly insisted upon learning about sin the hard way. He was greatly surprised at its severity and destination. Thankfully, he returned to the outstretched arms of a loving father. Dear sinner, you can do that today (Matt. 11:28-30). Dear Christian, refuse to go into the far country. **Do not let the prodigal son's surprises be your surprises!!**

Endnotes

1 All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version, (1901).

2 The author is indebted for this seed thought to the late R. A. Baker, professor at Alabama Christian College, registrar at Alabama Christian School of Religion, faithful Gospel preacher, and dear friend.

CHAPTER 29

The Parable Of The Net

Marvin Rickett

Introduction

JESUS OFTEN SPOKE IN parables when He taught. The word parable is from a compound Greek word, **parabole**, meaning “cast alongside of.” A familiar story is cast alongside of an unfamiliar truth so the hearers could understand the truth. Jesus was a master at fitting His parables to the listeners’ experiences. He spoke in parables to make the truth plainer to those earnest seekers of truth and to obscure it from those who had little interest in learning truth.

In Matthew 13, there are recorded in succession seven kingdom parables: (1) the sower, which taught the types of hearts receiving the seed of the kingdom (vv. 3-23), (2) the tares, which taught the evil elements confronting the kingdom (vv. 24-30, 36-43), (3) the mustard seed, which taught the growth of the kingdom (vv. 31-32), (4) the leaven, which taught the impact of the kingdom (v. 33), (5) the treasure in the field, which taught the value of the kingdom (v. 44), (6) the pearl of great price, which taught the cruciality of seeking the kingdom (vv. 45-46), and (7) the dragnet, which taught the final separation in the kingdom (vv. 47-50). This lecture deals with the seventh parable.

The Parable Of The Net

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a net,
that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every
kind: Which, when it was full, they drew to shore,

and sat down, and gathered the good into vessels, but cast the bad away. So shall it be at the end of the world: the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just, And shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth (13:47-50).¹

The word “net” comes from the original **sagene**, meaning “a large net, dragnet, seine.” These were very long nets which were used to make a very wide and deep sweep and sometimes enclosed a very large quantity of fishes. The word “bad” comes from the original **sapra** meaning “poor quality, unfit for use, worthless.” These were the sea life unfit for human consumption which were cast away.

There are similarities between the parable of the tares and the parable of the dragnet. A. T. Robertson, in his Greek word studies, makes a parallel: “Just as the field is the world, so the dragnet catches all the fish that are in the sea. The separation comes afterward.”² It should be pointed out that, in the parable of the dragnet, the sea apparently represents the world, and the dragnet represents the kingdom of God, whereas, in the parable of the tares, the field represents the world, and the wheat represents the children of the kingdom. Other parallels between the two parables are the harvest (separation) at the end of the world, the reapers (sorters) being angels, the separation between the wheat and the tares (the good and the bad), and the tares and bad being cast into the furnace of fire.

A parable usually had one main lesson, though it might have several others implied. The main lesson of the parable of the dragnet seems to be the great separation at the end of the world. In the parable, the good sea life (that which was good for food) is separated from the bad sea life (that which was unfit for food). The sea life fit for food was gathered into vessels, and the sea life unfit for food was

cast away. In like manner, the good and the bad among mankind will be separated in a judgment at the end of the world. J. W. Sheperd stated:

The one truth emphasized in the parable of the dragnet is that in its own suitable time the separation will be effected and will be according to the character and the worth of each to God.³

Wayne Jackson said that the main lesson of the parable of the dragnet is the coming separation in the kingdom.⁴ Frank L. Cox, in a sermon book, said that “one central truth is presented—the final separation of the good from the bad.”⁵

This separation will take place at the end of the world. There will be a Judgment Day. God

hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath give assurance unto all men in that he hath raised him from the dead (Acts 17:31).

It will be at the last day: “He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day” (John 12:48). The good and the bad, the righteous and the unrighteous, will live together in this world until the end of time. Even in the kingdom, to a degree, the good and the bad are left together in this life. No superhuman agency will interfere until the end of the world. A word of caution is needed, however. This does not exclude the necessity of church discipline. H. Leo Boles said:

To suppose that Jesus meant to teach that good and bad men must be permitted to live and work together in the church with no discipline by withdrawal is a perversion of the simple meaning given by Jesus.⁶

When the fruits of a person's conduct can be plainly seen to be evil, discipline needs to be brought to bear. However, only God can see all the sins of men.

The agents who will do the separating at the end of the world are the angels of God. Man does not have the ability in the finer points of judgment. He cannot see into the hearts of men and judge them inwardly. He can only judge by their outward words and deeds. Perfect judgment can occur only when the judge can see the thoughts and intents of the heart and can know all the secrets of a man. God can: "for the Lord seeth not as man seeth: for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7). God's judgments are perfectly just and accurate, and the Judge of all the earth will do right (Gen. 18:25). There will be no mistakes in judgment at the end of the world. No bad ones will be gathered into the vessels, nor will any good ones be cast away.

The separation of the good and the bad in the sea life is planned and deliberate. Adequate time is taken to accomplish the task. They waited until the net was ashore and sat down to do the separating. Likewise, the Lord's Judgment Day will be deliberate and expected. It will not be hasty and haphazard. The time of it will take some folks by surprise, but the fact of it need not. There is an abundance of warnings in the Scriptures.

The great separation at the end of the world is spoken of by Jesus in Matthew 25:

When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory; and before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left (25:31-33).

In this revelation of God's judgment, the sheep correspond with the good sea life in the parable of the net. They inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world. The goats correspond with the bad sea life in the parable of the net. They are remanded to the place of everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels. Also, in Revelation 20, a separation is implied. Those whose names are in the book of life are separated from those whose names are not in the book of life. The names which are in the book of life correspond with the good sea life in the parable of the net. The names which are not found in the book of life correspond with the bad sea life in the parable of the net. They are cast into the lake of fire and brimstone.

There are some other lessons implied by the parable of the dragnet. The great net which gathers in of every kind is the consequence of the preaching of the Gospel. The great commission says, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). If the sea represents the world, those gathered into the net would be those whom the Gospel "catches." Many are truly converted; some may not be. Many are sincere; some may not be. Many persevere in righteousness; some lapse into unrighteousness. Many keep themselves cleansed by walking in the light of God's Word (1 John 1:7); some harbor secret sins: "Some men's sins are open beforehand, going before to judgment; and some men they follow after" (1 Tim. 5:24). Fishermen cannot be certain of results until the net is brought to shore. The proclaimers of the Gospel know very little about the ultimate success of the Gospel. The present state of a mixed society is temporary. There is coming a time of separation.

The sorting is done after the net is drawn in. It is not feasible to sort while drawing in the net. The attention of the fishermen is necessarily absorbed in sweeping the sea

and getting the net to shore. In the operation, not every fish is seen; some of them are too deep, and the water may not be clear. The sorting must wait until the net is drawn onto the shore. Then the sorting is deliberately and patiently done. This does not prohibit church discipline. To make this claim is to stretch the parable too far. Other passages certainly demand church discipline (Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:5; 2 Thess. 3:6). Church discipline corrects the worst abuses and keeps the leaven of evil-doing from being pervasive in the church. But perfect purging can only come at the end of the world, when the Lord Himself, through the agency of the holy angels, will effect the perfect separation.

Those sorted on the seashore were separated into either one of two groups, called the good and the bad. The good were placed in the vessels for use; the bad were cast away to perish. A similar destiny awaits people. Those judged “wicked” will be severed from those judged “just.” The just will inherit eternal life in heaven with God. They are those who have added to their lives the Christian graces, made their calling and election sure, and “so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 1:11). Terry Hightower said, “Only those who truly are in the kingdom and who remain faithful will be saved eternally.”⁷

The wicked will be cast into a furnace of fire. It is a place of severe punishment, for there shall be “wailing and gnashing of teeth.” These are the actions of extreme anguish. This, no doubt, refers to the fires of hell. It is called a lake of fire and brimstone (Rev. 21:8). It is called everlasting fire, a place prepared for the devil and his angels (Matt. 25:41). It is called unquenchable fire (Luke 3:17). Fruitless branches and chaff are cast into the fire (John 15:6; Matt. 3:12). Those who would doubt the reality of hell

should consider that Jesus had more to say about that place than any other Bible character. Whoever calls his brother a fool shall be in danger of “hell fire” (Matt. 5:22). It is more profitable that a member of the body perish than that the “whole body be cast into hell” (5:29-30). One should not fear those who would kill the body but cannot kill the soul, “but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (10:28). Jesus called a proselyte made by the Pharisees a “twofold more the child of hell than yourselves” (23:15). He asked how they could escape the “damnation of hell” (23:33). He referred to hell as “outer darkness” in Matthew 25:30. He called hell “everlasting fire” and “everlasting punishment” in 25:41, 46. It is difficult not to conclude that hell is a real place and that a number of the earth’s people are going there at the end of the world. All right-thinking people want to avoid it at all costs.

Conclusion

God must separate the people of the earth. Only those who believe in God (Heb. 11:6), come to Him through the way of Christ (John 14:6), believe and obey the Gospel (Rom. 1:16), and have their souls cleansed with the blood of Christ (1 John 1:7) can enter into God’s heaven. The rest cannot go to heaven. At some time, God must render judgment and decide which individuals can enter heaven and which individuals cannot. They must be separated. This is what takes place in the Day of Judgment at the end of the world.

Endnotes

- 1 All quotes are from the King James Version of the Bible.
- 2 A. T. Robertson, **Word Pictures in the New Testament**, Volume 1 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1930), pp. 110-111.
- 3 J. W. Sheperd, **The Christ of the Gospels** (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1957), p. 228.
- 4 Wayne Jackson, “The Parables of Jesus,” **Christ in**

You, the Hope of Glory, ed. Winford Claiborne, Freed-Hardeman Lectures (Henderson, TN: Freed-Hardeman University, 1993), pp. 173-185.

5 Frank L. Cox, **Sermon Notes on the Parables of Jesus** (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1960), p. 20.

6 H. Leo Boles, **A Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew** (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1989), p. 300.

7 Terry Hightower, "A Net," **Spiritual Sword** (January 1989), p. 11.

CHAPTER 30

The Parable Of The Laborers In The Vineyard

Jimmy Ferguson

Commendation

I WISH TO EXPRESS MY sincere appreciation to B. J. Clarke and the fine elders of the Southaven church of Christ for the invitation to participate in this splendid lectureship program. The Southaven congregation has a reputation for being strong and sound in the faith. Truly, much good will come for many years through the efforts put forth in this lectureship.

The Text (Matthew 20:1-16)

For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard. And when he had agreed with the labourers for a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went about the third hour, and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, And said unto them; Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you. And they went their way. Again he went out about the sixth and ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard; and

whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive. So when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the labourers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first. And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny. But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny. And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house, Saying, These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day. But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.

Introduction

Jesus began this parable with the familiar phrase, “the kingdom of heaven is like...,” in which He teaches some aspect of the kingdom—life in the kingdom, duty demanded in the kingdom, loyalty expected in the kingdom, the sacrifice called for in the kingdom, etc. These lessons, delivered prior to the establishment of the kingdom, become all the more significant to those of us now in the kingdom. As John had prepared a people for the Lord (Luke 1:17), it can truly be said that Jesus prepared a people for the kingdom. Although the kingdom was still in the future, the things of character, disposition, and attitude of which Jesus spoke, could be immediately applied as His hearers received His words.

This parable is actually a continuation of the discussion in the previous chapter. Peter had asked the Lord, “Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?” (Matt. 19:27). Jesus replied:

Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye shall also sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel (v. 28).

However, He also gave a warning against thinking that their position was “set in stone.” He said, “But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first” (v. 30). This point had to do with those who had spent themselves in the Lord’s service, placing themselves and their comforts last in order that He might be first in their lives.

All of this was to the effect that such sacrificial service will result in spiritual/eternal benefits from God beyond anything man can imagine. To further illustrate this principle, Jesus told the parable of the laborers in the vineyard.

The Householder Seeks Laborers

“For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard” (Matt. 20:1).

A householder is a “house-master,” or one in charge of a house, with all of its concerns such as fields, vineyards, etc. This man, desiring workers for his vineyards, goes out early in the day to seek those who will work in his vineyard.

The vineyard is the church. The householder is God. The Lord requires workers in His kingdom. Verse one says that the householder went out to hire laborers into his vineyard. They were hired to labor on his behalf. When the church was established, the Lord needed workers who would go out and spread the good news of salvation to the lost. One can surely see the results of the work of the apostles and early Christians from the following:

And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul (Acts 4:32);

And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ (5:42);

the number of the disciples was multiplied (6:1);

the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith (6:7);

they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word (8:4);

these that have turned the world upside down are come hither also (17:6).

The Lord needs workers today, just as He did in the early days of the church. Jesus says, “The harvest truly is great, but the labourers are few: pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that He would send forth labourers into his harvest” (Luke 10:2). Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:58 that Christians are to be “always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.” He further writes that we are to “be ready to every good work” (Tit. 3:1). Jesus stated, “I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work” (John 9:4). The Lord has always encouraged His people to work. In the long ago, the prophet declared, “Woe to them that are at ease in Zion” (Amos 6:1).

Let us also note that the place of work is in the vineyard—the church. The laborers were hired into **His** vineyard. They were not told to go work in the vineyard of their choice. The Lord has only one vineyard—one church. Jesus promised, “Upon this rock I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18). Paul writes that God “hath put all things under his (Christ’s, JF) feet, and gave him to be head over all things to the church which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all” (Eph. 1:22-23). Please note from

this passage that the church and the body are one and the same. Paul further wrote, “There is one body” (4:4). God will not reward anyone for work done outside His vineyard, the church. He is glorified only in the church (3:21).

Laborers Are Found At Different Hours

And when he had agreed with the labourers for a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, And said unto them; Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you. And they went their way. Again he went out about the sixth and ninth hour, and did likewise (Matt. 20:2-5).

The householder hired laborers to work in his vineyard at different times during the day. The group hired first agreed with the owner to work for a “penny,” literally a “denarius,” a Roman coin which was the usual pay for a day’s work. Finding that he needs more workers, at the third hour of the day he finds men standing idle in the marketplace (v. 3), and he sends them into his vineyard, but this time with no definite payment specified. He proposes to do what is fair by them, and they obviously have faith that it will be so. He simply promises, “whatsoever is right I will give you” (v. 4). We are then told that at two other times during the day, the householder, still in need of workers, hires some at the sixth and ninth hours of the day. Apparently, he hires these under the same agreement made with those of the third hour, promising them “that which is right.”

Laborers Hired At The Eleventh Hour

And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? They say

unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard; and whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive (Matt. 20:6-7).

The heart of this parable has to do with the hiring of the eleventh hour workers. When asked, “Why stand ye here all the day idle?,” they readily answered, “Because no man hath hired us.” They seemingly had been ready for work but had not received an invitation or an opportunity to work. The householder then employed them and sent them “into the vineyard.” There is no encouragement here to wait until the “eleventh hour” of life to respond to the Gospel call. Keep in mind what a terrible chance these workers took if they deliberately waited until too late. They may not have had a final chance. This is a source of encouragement to those who may now be in the “eleventh hour” not to despair because of a wasted life and wasted opportunities. If one learns the Gospel in the sunset of life, he should not delay his obedience. Nothing here would commend waiting until the last minute to work in the kingdom, disregarding the opportunities that come in everyone’s lifetime.

Payment At The End Of The Workday

So when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the labourers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first. And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny (Matt. 20:8-9).

The Lord of the vineyard now orders that the laborers be paid, beginning with the last hired, and proceeding in order to the first. No doubt, to their surprise, the eleventh hour workers received a penny, the amount that had been promised to the workers hired at the earliest time in the

day. This shows the kindness and generosity of the householder in showing such benevolence to those hired late in the day.

Some Unhappy Over Payment

But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny. And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house, Saying, These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day (Matt. 20:10-12).

The first workers, now knowing the generosity shown the eleventh hour workers, come to be paid and assume that their amount will be multiplied based on what the eleventh hour workers received. However, they are paid a penny, which was what was agreed upon earlier, and the same amount the eleventh hour workers received. They believe the householder to be unfair and inconsiderate seeing that they have “borne the burden and heat of the day.” They are unhappy that the eleventh hour workers have been “made equal unto us” (v. 12).

The Goodness And Fairness Of The Householder

But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? (Matt. 20:13-15).

The householder reminds these workers of the agreement that had been made; and the householder kept

that agreement. He also reminds them that he is within his rights to do with his possessions as he pleases. He further asks them, “Is thine eye evil, because I am good?” (v. 15). That is, “Are you going to be possessed with evil thoughts over a matter wherein I have been good?”

The First And Last

“So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen” (Matt. 20:16).

The householder told the steward to begin with the last and end with the first. The last were first in a very important sense; they received a reward much greater in proportion to the labor which they had performed. Jesus says, “so”—that is, as in the parable, so it shall be in the kingdom of heaven. Many, in fact all, have the Gospel invitation, but not all accept it and live faithful through life.

Lessons Learned

Among the many lessons to be learned from this parable, consider the following.

1. The Lord requires laborers in His vineyard, the church. One’s baptism into Christ does not automatically ensure his eternal salvation. True, baptism is necessary in order to receive the forgiveness of sins. The Scriptures are very plain when they state, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). One must be baptized in order to enter into the church, the family of God. Paul writes, “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body” (1 Cor. 12:13). Inasmuch as one is baptized into Christ’s death (Rom. 6:3), thus contacting His cleansing blood, one receives salvation from sin. However, one must be an active worker in the church. Paul writes, “Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much

more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12). This does not mean that man can devise his own means of salvation, but he does have an active role in his salvation, even after baptism. God’s Word states, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). One can easily see from reading the book of Acts that the early church grew because the apostles and early Christians were workers. Acts 8:4 states, “Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word.” One reason they did this was because they understood the urgent need of taking the Gospel to the lost. If the church is to grow and prosper today, faithful Christians must understand the need to work. Jesus said:

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world (Matt. 28:19-20).

2. There is work for every qualified worker, and all are qualified. Consider the Parable of the Talents (Matt. 25:14-30). Talents (a sum of money) were given to three men “according to his several ability” (25:15). There was a difference in the ability of each man; yet each man did have some ability. Furthermore, each man was responsible for his ability. This writer has heard members of the church say, “I have no ability,” to which we should reply, “If you are a ‘one talent man,’ the Lord expects you to use your talent.” In 1 Corinthians 12, the apostle Paul compared the body of Christ to the human body and said:

If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear shall say, Because I am not

the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? And if they were all one member, where were the body? But now are they many members, yet one body (vv. 15-20).

There is something which **every** member of the church can do. Consider the following: discuss Christianity with a friend, give a person a tract on a particular subject, tell and show others the happiness of being a Christian, invite people to worship with you, visit a newcomer to the community and invite him to the services of the church, bring a friend to Bible class with you, teach the Gospel to someone in their home. This list could certainly be multiplied. James warns, “Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin” (Jas. 4:17). Consider the Judgment scene pictured in Matthew 25:31-46. Those on the Lord’s left hand are lost because of what they neglected to do. John writes that every individual will be judged “according to their works” (Rev. 20:12). Every member of the church is qualified to do something.

3. It is within God’s power to reward. The Hebrews writer states that God “is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him” (Heb. 11:6). Since God is the rewarder and the “householder,” all must accept His conditions in order to meet with His approval.

4. Some come into the kingdom early and fall away. Others are faithful all their lives. God encourages His people to be faithful at whatever point they enter the kingdom. How tragic it is when one accepts the Lord’s terms of pardon, thus obtaining forgiveness of sins and then to so neglect our salvation that we lose it! God’s Word states:

Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at

any time we should let them slip....How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation (Heb. 2:1, 3).

Peter writes of those who have obeyed the truth and fell away: "For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they had known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them" (2 Pet. 2:21).

5. The length of time for vineyard work is short. James writes, "For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away" (Jas. 4:14). Jesus said, "I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work" (John 9:4). Tomorrow may never come. Therefore, every individual, when taught, needs to obey the Lord immediately and every worker needs to be busy in the kingdom. Paul writes, "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2).

6. God is a God of mercy, and He does not withhold His blessings, in the fullest extent, from those who might come to Him later, at various stages of their lives. All who obey have the remission of sins, whether young or old (Acts 2:38). All who obey are privileged to enjoy fellowship with God and Christ in God's family, the church (1 Tim. 3:15). All who obey are privileged to worship in spirit and in truth (John 4:24); and all that obey can have continued forgiveness of sins as they continue to walk in the light (1 John 1:7).

7. Man does not merit his salvation. Although the eleventh hour workers worked only for an hour, they were paid the same as those who had worked all day. Should we say that they deserved the full day's wages? Certainly not. The full day's payment was simply an act of benevolence on the part of the householder. Man cannot merit or earn his salvation. Paul writes, "For by grace are ye saved

through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9).

8. Man must work (obey) in order to be rewarded. Although man cannot earn his salvation by any amount of works, he is still required to work if he expects to be rewarded. The other workers in the parable would only be paid at the end of the day’s work. The eleventh hour workers were required to work, even if only for an hour, in order to be paid.

9. Even those who truly obey at the eleventh hour will have that fullness of blessings. However, we need to note that the eleventh hour workers did not willfully waste their day prior to being hired. No man had hired them, and thus the eleventh hour was their first opportunity. This lends no encouragement to the one who lives his life in sin and, and then, in a less-than-real conviction, decides to throw God a crumb at the eleventh hour of his life, **just in case**. The motive for conversion, whether it be early in life or in the evening of life, should be a genuine desire to become God’s child and to please Him—whether one has fifty more years to live or one more day.

Conclusion

The point of this parable is that God, through His abundant mercy, bestows fullness of blessings on all those who enter His kingdom through obedience to the Gospel. The encouragement is that men obey, and obey as early in life as they learn the truth, thus giving God the fullest measure of service possible, knowing that He, in turn, will give the fullest measure of blessing now and eternally. One should desire to obey the Lord, to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3:18), and to receive the reward promised to all those who obey Him (2 Tim. 4:8; Rev. 2:10).

CHAPTER 31

The Parable Of The Talents

Barry Grider

Introduction

THE WEEK OF JESUS' crucifixion was truly eventful for our Lord. It began with His triumphant entry into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey and ended with His victory over the grave. In between, Jesus repudiated the corruption of the Jewish leaders and paid with His life. Not only did He drive the moneychangers out of the temple following His arrival in Jerusalem, He, likewise, excoriated the Pharisees before the throng that had gathered in the city of David to observe the Passover:

Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to the disciples, Saying, The scribes and Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not (Matt. 23:1-3).

During this particular week, Jesus spent much time with His disciples, preparing them for His cruel and vicious death. Even the One Whose heart was heavy with sorrows, knowing He would bear the sins of the world, was more concerned about His disciples than Himself (John 13:1). Jesus also filled their hearts with instruction and wisdom that could only come from the lips of the Master Teacher,

the One Who spoke with all authority (Matt. 7:29). It was during this week that Jesus relayed several parables, including The Two Sons, The Wicked Husbandman, The Marriage of the King's Son, The Wise and Foolish Virgins, and The Talents. It is the responsibility of this writer to help us learn the many lessons from the Parable of the Talents.

Background

The occasion for the Parable of the Talents was the Tuesday of crucifixion week. Jesus demonstrates how stressful and demanding "hard" preaching can be by desiring a place of respite and relaxation away from the multitudes. Jesus found the seclusion He desired in Bethany, at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. On the return from Jerusalem, Jesus and His disciples paused upon the Mount of Olives, which is to the east of Jerusalem, on the other side of the Kidron Valley. Here the disciples questioned the Lord about the destruction of the temple and the end of the world. According to Matthew 24:1, they had observed, along with Jesus, the mammoth size of the temple, and Jesus had spoken about its destruction. These followers of Christ were confounded as to how such could occur and when it would happen. Atop the Mount of Olives, one could behold a prominent view of the city. Jesus explained not only the circumstances surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem (24:1-35), but also relayed to His disciples information about the end of the world (24:36-25:46). During this Olivet discourse, as Jesus is in the midst of His discussion concerning His second coming at the end of the age, He presents the parables of the Wise and Foolish Virgins and the Talents. The former emphasizes the need to be prepared when Jesus comes again. The latter instructs the disciples about faithfulness until He comes.

The Parable Analyzed And Explained

The Parable of the Talents is closely associated in meaning with the Parable of the Pounds (cf. Luke 19:11-27). Both emphasize the importance, even the necessity, of being faithful stewards in the kingdom. Paul wrote, "Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful" (1 Cor. 4:2). Let us observe the Parable of the Talents, as spoken by our Lord:

For the kingdom of heaven is as a man traveling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods. And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to his several ability; and straightway took his journey. Then he that had received the five talents went and traded with the same, and made them other five talents. And likewise he that had received two, he also gained other two. But he that had received one went and digged in the earth, and hid his lord's money. After a long time the lord of those servants cometh, and reckoneth with them. And so he that had received five talents came and brought other five talents, saying, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me five talents: behold, I have gained beside them five talents more. His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord. He also that had received two talents came and said, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me two talents: behold, I have gained two other talents beside them. His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord. Then he which had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew thee that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strewed: And I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast that is thine. His lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and

slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strewed: Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury. Take therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him which hath ten talents. For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath. And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 25:14-30).

The phrase “the kingdom of heaven is” was supplied by the translators and was not in the original. However, such a phrase does no harm to the passage, seeing that one’s behavior in the kingdom is the subject under consideration. The kingdom is the church (Matt. 16:18-19), which began on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). Paul had been translated into the kingdom (Col. 1:13). John was in the kingdom while in exile on Patmos (Rev. 1:9). All Christians have become citizens of the kingdom through the new birth (John 3:3-5). Both watchfulness, as taught in the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins, and faithfulness, as taught in the Parable of the Talents, assure the salvation of an individual’s soul.

This parable, as understood by the Jewish audience, could remind the hearers of Archelaus, who ruled in Judea shortly after the birth of Jesus. While we could never compare the pristine character of Jesus with that of the notoriously wicked Archelaus, it was this son of Herod the Great who left his servants in control, as he went to Rome to claim Judea. Upon his return, he executed his opponents, rewarded his faithful servants, and ruled until his death.

The man under consideration in this parable calls together his “own” servants. These were not men who had been hired, as in the Parable of the Vineyard Laborers.

These servants were owned by the master. He, because of ownership, had the right to expect of them to do his will. He had a claim on them.

The master entrusted his goods or property to his servants before he departed for the far country. He gave to the first servant five talents; to the second, he gave two talents; and, finally, to the third servant he gave one talent. A talent was a weight of measurement generally representing about fifty-eight pounds. Its worth was approximately \$1500 in silver. However, we do not know the worth of these talents. The standard meaning of the word “talent” today refers to a person’s natural or acquired ability, or even his superior intellect. While this was not the meaning in the first century, perhaps the present definition was acquired through a pensive study of the parable under consideration.

Upon delivering his goods to his servants, the owner of the property then left on his journey. Each servant was in possession of his talents and duty-bound to gain more. Why did the owner not distribute the talents equally? He did! Each man was given talents based on his ability. This man was not a cruel taskmaster. He did not expect the impossible from his servants. However, he did expect each one to perform based on the ability he had been given. He exhibited confidence in each man to whom he had distributed. Therefore, the owner was not squandering his possessions but looked forward to his return to see how well his workers had performed so that each one might be rewarded accordingly.

There is no doubt that the first two servants went right to work on behalf of the master. They took their responsibilities seriously—not only because they honored and respected their master because of his ownership, but likewise for his kindness. Just because they were servants did not mean their owner was cruel. To the contrary, he

displayed confidence and trust in each of them, or else he would not have left his property to their oversight.

The first servant engaged in some business whereby he caused his master to profit, thus gaining an additional five talents. Because he employed that which was good, he doubled his owner's capital. The same could be said of the second servant, who, likewise, traded and obtained two more talents. Again, he was not expected to do that which was impossible, but what was realistic based on that which he had been given.

But the focus of the parable is on the third servant, who hid his one talent in the earth. The ground often served as a vault to store treasure during this time period. Some excavators today will uncover hidden treasure which has been stored in the ground, untouched for centuries. The first-century mindset would be very familiar with this idea. In Matthew 13:44, Jesus relays a parable about a treasure hidden in a field.

While the third servant did not have the ability of the other two servants, his lord still saw fit to grant him one talent, and he intended for that talent to be invested wisely. In not using his talent, he failed his master. He failed to use his abilities. He failed to take advantage of his opportunities. As a result, he did not gain anything for his master. Notice from the text, he did not steal nor squander the talent given by his owner; he just hid the talent in the ground.

Finally, reckoning day came. The lord had promised he would return. Yet he was gone for a long period of time. While some perhaps would have given up on their master, the first two servants persevered until the owner returned. As a result, the first servant anxiously comes to the master and is delighted to show him the additional five talents that he has gained. When one has done right, he has no fear. His lord is pleased with the servant's faithfulness

and rewards him accordingly. The servant is made a ruler over many things. Boles writes that it is customary with eastern monarchies to have some satraps and other officers of provinces to reside at the court of the king. Thus, the servant is invited to reside with the lord and therefore is greatly honored.

Likewise, the second servant comes to receive his blessing, having gained an additional two talents. Though he did not have five talents to lay at his master's feet, he was still rewarded and granted the same privileges as the first servant because he used his full abilities.

It is interesting that the first two servants were ready to give an account, but the third servant came last and, no doubt, was embarrassed as he stood before his owner. He now must answer for his neglect. As you read the text, he begins to make excuses for his futility. As is often the case, instead of taking responsibility for his actions, he blames someone else. In fact, he blames his master. The servant accuses his lord of being severe, rigid, and cruel. As a result, the servant says he hid his talent because of fear. Fear caused him to do nothing. Yet, the master had every right to expect as much fidelity in this third servant as he did in the other two servants. The parable is abundantly clear: doing nothing is doing wrong. This servant had done no harm, but he had not done any good. He grudgingly gives back the one talent and expects his lord to be pleased. However, he failed to invest his master's goods and thus is charged with indolence. This wicked servant, however, would rather blame the character of his lord. Often, when someone is guilty of certain characteristics, they blame others to take the focus off of themselves. So it is with this servant. He was a man who was selfish and unwilling to work except under conditions that suited him.

If the servant was going to refuse to invest the one talent, he could have at least loaned the talent to the

exchangers, and the master could have collected the interest. It was common for money to be borrowed by the exchangers for a low rate of interest and loaned to others at a higher rate. You remember, Jesus drove the moneychangers out of the temple, according to Matthew 21. This servant even refused to loan the money so that his master could collect the interest.

The principal of “use it or lose it” is applied here. The wicked and slothful servant had his talent taken away, and such was given to the servant with ten talents. This is a man who was self-deceived. As a result, his master dealt with him accordingly and cast him out.

The Parable Applied

What is the message Jesus intended for His followers to learn from the parable of the talents? The man traveling into a far country is representative of Christ. The far country to which he is traveling is heaven. Jesus, coeternal and equal with the Father, resided in heaven before coming to this earth:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made....And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth (John 1:1-3; 14).

Jesus often spoke of His relationship with the Father, and He continued to commune with Him during His earthly sojourn (John 17:5). Likewise, He longed to return by His side: “Yet a little while am I with you, and then I go unto him that sent me” (7:33). When did Jesus return to the “far country” called heaven? In Acts 1, we find Jesus in His final post-resurrection meeting with His chosen

apostles. After charging them with the Great Commission, and commanding that they wait in Jerusalem until the outpouring of the Holy Spirit:

he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; Which also said, ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven (vv. 9-11).

The “far country” to which Jesus has gone is the goal of every faithful child of God. With the realization that our Lord is preparing us a place (John 14:1-3), we press on as pilgrims in search of this better country (Heb. 11:14-16).

Remember, before Jesus’ return, He commissioned the twelve and all who would obey their voice to take the good news of human redemption and preach it to all of lost humanity:

And Jesus came and spake unto them saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and lo, I am with you always even unto the end of the world (Matt. 28:18-20).

And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned (Mark 16:15-16).

And he said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behooved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem (Luke 24:46-47).

Jesus' charge to His disciples is inclusive of all Christians in every generation, since this commission was to last until the end of the world. It is the will of God that others be saved through the preaching of the Gospel by human instruments (2 Tim. 2:2). The totality of our lives ought to be about saving lost souls and encouraging each other on a path that leads to heaven.

How does the Parable of the Talents affect each one of us and our responsibilities as Christians? God uses ordinary people to accomplish His will. God expects for each one to fulfill his or her obligations based on individual ability. God does not expect the impossible, but He does expect something. Some religious groups mock the idea of giving God our best. However, the parable of the talents emphasizes the necessity of giving our all to the Lord. While the three servants in the parable were to invest the money entrusted to them, our Lord expects each of us to invest our lives. You may have more to offer than someone else, so fulfill your obligations. Perhaps you are lacking in certain abilities; still do what you can do.

Many Christians demonstrate on a daily basis how serious Christianity is to them. They are careful to fulfill the Master's marching orders and take advantage of every opportunity to do good (Gal. 6:10). Many who have fewer talents often fulfill their Christian duties better than those who are multi-talented. For example, living in Alabama is a ninety-year-old woman who is nearly blind. Yet she would often call for me to bring her tracts on the plan of salvation and the New Testament church so she could distribute to the many non-Christian friends and neighbors who would stop by to visit her. Likewise, a quiet elderly couple often would go to the local mall and extend an invitation to shoppers to come and worship at their particular congregation. I have witnessed many excited young people enthusiastically going door-to-door while engaging in a

campaign for Christ. When was the last time, dear friend, you used your talents to reach out to the lost, either through the presentation of a tract or extending an invitation to Bible study?

Our relationship to God is determined by our obedience. Jesus said, "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). Furthermore, the same writer recorded, "And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments" (1 John 2:3). The first two servants in the parable demonstrated their love, respect, appreciation, and submission to their master through their obedience to his will. May the same be said of every Christian regarding his attitude toward his Master.

The parable of the talents teaches the followers of Christ to take what has been entrusted to them and use it for the advancement of the Lord's kingdom. **First, one must be willing to give of his time.** How often do members of the church fail in their responsibilities because they lack time? Luke records the following:

And he (Jesus) said unto another, Follow me. But he said, Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father. Jesus said unto him, Let the dead bury their dead: but go thou and preach the kingdom of God. And another also said, Lord, I will follow thee; but let me first go bid them farewell, which are at home at my house. And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God (Luke 9:59-62).

What was the problem with these two would-be followers of Christ? They did not have enough time. Yet we know there are twenty-four hours in every day, 168 hours in every week, and most people do what they really want to do. If we are going to be the servants of Christ, we must have our priorities in order. It takes time to get involved in the lives of people and to promote the cause of

the Lord. Paul said we must be, “Redeeming the time, because the days are evil” (Eph. 5:16). It is interesting, when we prioritize our time, it seems that the hours multiply. In fact, those who are willing to sacrifice time for the Lord’s cause have an amazing energy. Elders have often found that church members who are the busiest will get more done than others. Isaiah’s words ring true: “But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint” (Isa. 40:31).

Second, we must give of our talents. Remember, in the parable, a talent is a unit of measurement. However, we do no harm to the text when we use the word according to the common vernacular. One must examine himself, find out his abilities, and realize his full potential. Fortunately, God has not given us all the same talents. Likewise, some have more abilities than others. Yet each individual is important so that the entire body of Christ can function properly:

For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him (1 Cor. 12:14-18).

Some are not willing to serve at all because they feel they are not as qualified as others in a certain area. Still, there are those who, if they are not in a prominent position where all can see and laud them for their work, will refuse to serve in a less conspicuous role. But if one cannot be faithful in little things, he cannot be faithful in much.

Third, we must give of our lives. The first two servants were totally consumed in pleasing their master through gaining additional talents. Remember, a long time passed between the master's departure and his return. Jesus says to us today, "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life" (Rev. 2:10). In what areas are we to be faithful? We are to be faithful in everything. Paul said:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God (Rom. 12:1-2).

Many Christians are not willing to surrender the totality of their lives to Christ. However, anything less than that will not be pleasing to Him.

Unfortunately, many supposed Christians react toward their responsibilities as did the third servant. They simply do nothing. Even their attendance at the worship assembly is sporadic; and when they do attend, such individuals feel they are doing God a favor. They refuse to use their abilities to serve Christ. James writes, "Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin" (Jas. 4:17). Obviously, the third servant knew what to do with the one talent; he just refused to do anything. However, he still thought his lord should be pleased. Yet the master was angry with him. The foolish virgins who were unprepared to meet the bridegroom lived their lives similar to this third servant.

When the owner returned, the wicked and slothful servant began to make excuses. He blamed the character of his lord. He accused him of being a hard man. As a result,

he claimed to have hidden his talent because he was afraid. Many today view God as a cruel taskmaster or a cosmic killjoy. The reason God is viewed in this way is because such people have never understood the joy of serving Christ, nor do they have an appreciation for His atoning death on the cross for their sins. In their eyes, every obligation and responsibility is a burden to be borne, not a blessing to be enjoyed. Some of the weakest and laziest church members will often “humbly” say, “I’ll never make it to heaven.” They readily admit they do nothing on behalf of Christ, but it is because in their minds they could never please Him. This type of fear is unhealthy and spiritually devastating. The Bible says:

But the **fearful**, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death (Rev. 21:8, emp. mine, BG).

You see, the first two servants were not afraid of the master. Neither are we to be afraid of our Lord. John writes, “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18).

The first and second servants were made rulers over many things. This typifies what will happen when the child of God is saved. However, those who are saved will not earn or merit that salvation because they put the Master in debt to them or because they outdid someone else. Just like the first two servants, God will reward us because of our faithfulness.

The servant who hid his talent was cast out. So it is with the fearful, lazy, indifferent member of the church: “And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 25:30).

Just like the one-talent man, many will make excuses before the throne of God. Those who thought they were right religiously, yet were not, will argue before the throne:

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity (7:21-23).

Likewise, there are some among God's children who will be caught unprepared. These are like the foolish virgins who said, "Lord, Lord, open to us. But he answered and said, Verily, I say unto you, I know you not" (25:11-12). Those like the wicked, one-talent servant will be included in that number.

Matthew 25 closes with the judgment scene. Those who were faithful had done what was only natural for Christians to do (2 Pet. 1:4). As a result, they were saved. Those on the left hand did not see nor take advantage of the opportunities the Lord had given, and therefore they did not render any service to Him. These were cast into the everlasting fire of hell (Matt. 25:41). So it is for each one who refuses to use the abilities and talents God has given him and fails in fulfilling his responsibilities before his Creator, Redeemer, and King. May each of us reflect soberly upon our lives, realizing God has entrusted the kingdom to us. Will he be able to say to you, "Well done, good and faithful servant"?

CHAPTER 32

The Parables Of The Faithful And Wise Servants

Lester Kamp

Introduction

I *HAVE FOR A NUMBER* of years benefited from the annual **POWER** lectures through the books that have been printed which contain these lectures. It is indeed a pleasure and honor to be part of the Eighth Annual **POWER** lectures this year. I commend the elders of the Southaven congregation for their wisdom in initiating this lectureship and for continuing to bless the brotherhood with this great material for our further study and profit. I commend the members of this congregation for all that they do individually and collectively to make this lectureship happen in such a wonderful way each year. I commend your preacher, B. J. Clarke, for the great job he does in putting this lectureship together each year on such important subjects, for compiling and editing the book which will strengthen Christians everywhere for years to come, and for all the work he does in the kingdom here and around the world. I consider it to be a great blessing to me to be here for these lectures.

During the course of this lectureship we will be studying the “Master Teacher,” Jesus the Christ. We will be looking closely at some of His teachings; we will be paying careful attention to those things He taught by using parables. When the subject of parables is mentioned, Jesus immediately comes to mind because He used this method of teaching more than any other teacher. Some of His parables are well known even by those who know little else about Jesus. Few, if any, would not know something about the Parable of the Prodigal Son or the Parable of the Good Samaritan. It would certainly be accurate to suggest that some of the parables of Jesus are among His best-known teachings.

The two parables that have been assigned to me are not among those which would be familiar to most. These parables, however, are important because Jesus taught them and because they are included by inspiration in the written record of the life of Christ. Because all Scripture is inspired (2 Tim. 3:16-17), and because we will all ultimately be judged by these words given to us by God (John 12:48), we need to give attention to these teachings (and every teaching) of Christ.

Background Of These Parables

Earlier in Luke 12, Jesus had taught the Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21), which warns against placing too much emphasis on material things. In that parable the foolish rich man had centered his heart (mind) on the earth and material things. The parable was introduced by Jesus with these words in verse 15: “Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.”¹ The rich man of the parable was a farmer who had an abundant harvest. His selfish response to these great blessings was to build bigger barns so that he might enjoy himself with

ease and pleasure for many years to come. The parable concludes with these words:

But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God (12:20-21).

According to God, a person who is “not rich toward God,” but has his heart and treasure on earth, is a fool.

In verses 22-34 of this same chapter, Jesus elaborated on the dangers of earthly cares. Jesus assured us that God provides for the birds and for the flowers, so He will provide for those who place their faith in Him. Jesus stressed to His followers that they should “rather seek ye the kingdom of God; and all these things shall be added unto you” (12:31). Jesus taught further that where people find their treasures determines where their heart is (12:34).

Thus, now, in the parables of the faithful and wise servants (12:35-48), Jesus contrasts the attitude of the rich fool with the attitude that faithful and wise servants of Christ should have. As with all parables, the details should not be forced too far by trying to find a parallel for every single part of the parable. One primary lesson is always the emphasis of a parable. That primary lesson of these parables should be kept clearly in mind through this study: The fool has his heart and mind centered on the earth and earthly goods; the faithful and wise servants of Christ have their hearts and minds centered on heaven and spiritual matters.

Be Watchful And Ready To Serve (vv. 35-38)

Our Lord begins with the admonition, “Let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning” (Luke 12:35). The terminology of Jesus’ statement has to do with the

garments typically worn in that day. Jesus here has reference to the loose, outer robe, which was more for appearance than for any practical use. This robe often would hinder free movement; therefore, it was either removed (Acts 7:58) or bound up by a girdle (i.e., a belt) when it interfered with the activity desired to be done. Such activities which would require having “your loins...girded about” would be working, walking, serving, running, doing battle, etc. To have one’s loins already girded suggests readiness to serve. The faithful and wise servants of the Lord will always be ready to do His bidding. The faithful will be constantly prepared to do the Lord’s Will. This prepared readiness comes from a separation from a love of this world and its goods (1 John 2:15-17; 2 Cor. 6:14-18) and from knowing what the Lord wants us to do (2 Tim. 3:17). Detachment from this world is closely connected to preparedness for the next (John 17:15). Being “thoroughly furnished unto all good works” comes as a result of studying and knowing God’s Word (17:17). These ideas not only apply to servants regarding the second coming of Christ, but also they apply because of the uncertainty of life and the certainty of death. Albert Barnes makes these important observations:

Be ready at all times to leave the world and enter into rest, when your Lord shall call you. Let every obstacle be taken out of the way; let every earthly care be removed, and be prepared to follow Him into His rest....So we, as we know not the hour when God shall call us, should be **always** ready to die.²

Recall the rich fool in the preceding verses.

This readiness and alertness is emphasized repeatedly in the New Testament. For example, in the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, a parable with similar emphasis on being prepared, Jesus tells us that

“they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut” (Matt. 25:10). Jesus then concluded, “Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh” (25:13). In a similar way, Jesus, in the passage before us, states, “Be ye therefore ready also: for the Son of man cometh at an hour when ye think not” (Luke 12:40).

In terms of mental, inner preparedness, the apostle Peter wrote, “Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:13). So the girding up of the loins suggests mental alertness and spiritual preparedness.

“Having your lights burning” suggests in the figure of the parable a return of the Lord³ during the night as noted in the references to the second and third watches (Luke 12:38). The significance of the lights burning is the idea of watchfulness, alertness to the situation at hand. In waiting for the Lord to come, the servant must see clearly the dangers that are present about him and be alert to the necessary things before the Lord appears. This idea is also repeatedly emphasized in the New Testament. Notice the emphasis in these words of Jesus regarding His second coming:

For the Son of man is as a man taking a far journey, who left his house, and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch. Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cock crowing, or in the morning: Lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping. And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch (Mark 13:34-37).

Paul admonished, “Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong” (1 Cor. 16:13). Again in connection with the return of the Lord, Paul warns:

Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation (1 Thess. 5:6-8).

Regarding the work of an evangelist, Paul urged, “But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry” (2 Tim. 4:5). As Peter looked toward the end of this age and the coming of Christ, he observed, “But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer” (1 Pet. 4:7). Even in the text of this parable, Jesus states, “Blessed are those servants, whom the Lord when he cometh shall find watching” (Luke 12:37).

A message so often repeated in Holy Writ must be recognized as vitally important. Watch! Keep your lights burning! The Lord comes!:

Of course, the Lord did not mean that His servants should, or even could, get everything ready, and then stand around watching and waiting for Him to come. The servants that He will find watching are the servants who are actively engaged in doing His will.⁴

According to Jesus, faithful disciples are like “men that wait for their Lord, when he will return from the wedding” (Luke 12:36). Here the reference is to the festive wedding banquet typical of that day. The custom was that, during the course of the celebration, at an unannounced time, a time impossible to foretell, the bridegroom would claim his bride at her parents’ house and then return to his own house with her. Whatever time that happened to be, often quite late, the servants were expected to be ready for the return of their Master and his wife.

The parallel between the spiritual servants of the Lord and the servants of a groom is obvious. Our Lord has gone to heaven, but He will return unexpectedly at any time. His faithful servants wait for His return. There will be no time for preparation when He returns. The time for constant preparation is now when His return has not yet occurred. The reference to “that when he cometh and knocketh, they may open unto him immediately” (Luke 12:36) is a reference to the fact that, when the groom comes and knocks, there will be no further time to prepare.

Looking forward to the time of Jesus’ return is characteristic of His faithful servants. When Christians partake of the Lord’s Supper each first day of the week, they look forward to His return. Paul told the Corinthians, “For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord’s death till he come” (1 Cor. 11:26). As Paul closes that book of 1 Corinthians, he refers again to the anticipation which should be in the heart of every Christian. In the King James Version, the word “Maranatha” appears in verse 22 of the last chapter of 1 Corinthians. The meaning of that term is “O Lord, come.”

Paul, in referring to the loyalty and devotion of Christians, states, “For our conversation (“citizenship,” ASV) is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil. 3:20). The importance of looking for (waiting for) the coming of the Lord can also be seen in this statement from the book of Hebrews: “So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation” (Heb. 9:28).

Peter views through inspiration the second coming of Christ as the day in which this present world will be completely destroyed. He wrote:

Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein

dwelleth righteousness. Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless (2 Pet. 3:13-14).

Looking for the coming of the Lord affects the way a person lives. Those who are faithful and wise will work toward being found by Him “in peace, without spot, and blameless.”

According to the parable, when the bridegroom arrives, “he shall gird himself, and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them” (Luke 12:37). Keep in mind that this is not to be taken literally, since it is part of the “trappings” of the parable. The idea that is suggested is that the wise and faithful servants will be given extraordinary blessings when the Lord returns. This figure is carried to its ultimate in Revelation 3:21: “To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.” The joys and glorious blessings of heaven are certainly comprehended.

During His ministry on earth, Jesus showed His willingness to do the very thing here described. Recall the occasion of the last supper with His apostles when He arose after supper and “laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself” (John 13:4). Having so done, He began to wash the feet of each and every disciple. Jesus humbled Himself, taking upon Himself the form of a servant (Phil. 2:7), and rendered unto His disciples those things which they needed. The ultimate need of every man is eternal salvation. That salvation is given to the faithful and wise servants when the Lord comes in judgment on the last day.

The possibility of the groom returning home in the second or third watch is mentioned in verse 38. As already noted, the groom’s return is anticipated in the dark hours of night: hence, the earlier reference to having “your lights

burning” (v.35). There is some discussion among commentators on this verse as to whether this is a reference to the Jewish way of dividing the night into three watches or the Roman division of the night into four watches. It is generally accepted that it is Roman accounting of time that is here being used. The first watch is not mentioned because the wedding banquet would definitely be still in progress. The fourth watch is not mentioned either, since the day would be breaking by that time. The second and third watches would suggest the quiet and weary hours of the night. The image may suggest that the Lord’s return may be much longer than many think and that the delay is a test of faithfulness. Peter adds that the delay also affords others the opportunity to repent and become obedient servants (2 Pet. 3:9).

The Goodman And The Thief (vv. 39-40)

Repeatedly the second coming of Christ is likened to a thief coming to break into a house. Jesus’ coming is not going to be preceded by warning signs. Thieves do not tell the homeowner if and when they are going to rob a house. There will be no signs preceding the Lord’s coming. He will come as a thief: “if the goodman of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched, and not have suffered his house to be broken through” (Luke 12:39). Jesus, here again, advises constant, sleepless vigilance for the coming of the Lord. Jesus’ reference to the house being “broken through” is to the materials of which houses were constructed in the first century. Houses were made of stone or clay, and the roofs were often clay or thatch. Thieves could dig through these materials fairly easily while the Master of the house was away. What is said here is parallel to Jesus’ remarks on the Mount of Olives (Matt. 24:43-44).

Notice the similarity of the imagery, and the importance of watchfulness, that is found in other passages:

For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief (1 Thess. 5:2-4).

The suddenness of Christ's return, according to Peter, ought to influence the way we live day by day:

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness (2 Pet. 3:10-11).

Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee (Rev. 3:3).

Just as the householder must at all times be ready to protect his property from a thief who may come at any time, "so also believers do not know when their Master will come, and should, accordingly, always be prepared in mind and heart. When least expected, He arrives."⁵ Jesus, therefore, warns: "Be ye therefore ready also: for the Son of man cometh at an hour when ye think not" (Luke 12:40).

Peter's Question (v. 41)

At this point in Jesus' teaching, Peter interrupted with the question, "Lord, speakest thou this parable unto us, or even unto all?" (Luke 12:41):

Peter's curiosity had been aroused. Jesus had been speaking about those who at His coming would be "ready" (v. 37), but He had implied that some would not be ready. An understandable inference would be that the twelve and some other, constant followers would be the ready ones; the rest of the people, the unready ones. Yet, from verse 22 on, the Master had been directing His attention to His disciples, and not nearly as directly to the vast multitude. Did the Master mean, then, that even among His disciples there would be those not ready to welcome Him? To whom was Jesus telling the parable?⁶

The Faithful And Wise Servants (vv. 42-44)

Jesus' answer is indirect and in the form of a parable. In essence, Jesus tells Peter that it will be the faithful and wise servants who shall be ready when the Lord comes. What is involved in being that faithful and wise servant?:

It is the hired servant's duty to work faithfully at the task assigned him; he must work according to the plans and purposes of the man who hires him. **He never thinks of adopting the idea that one way is just as good as another, just so he is honest**; for he knows that he could not be honest with his employer in following such a notion (emp. mine, LK).⁷

There are, however, even today those who claim to be able to be faithful servants of Christ while following their own ways, laboring under the false notion that one way is just as good as another. How ridiculous! The thrust of Jesus' reply to Peter is that the Lord requires faithful service on the part of **all**.

Notice that Jesus' reply is in the form of a question. He answers, "Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his lord shall make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of meat in due season?" (Luke 12:42). Noticing the parable of the unrighteous steward in Luke 16,

a steward was sometimes given charge of his Master's business, certainly his household affairs, and a part of his duty would be looking after the food supply.

Christians are stewards while in the service of Christ. God has entrusted His servants with certain powers and property to be used in the Lord's service. Nothing belongs to the steward; everything belongs to the Master and is to be used in the interest of His cause. The obligations of a steward rest on all, even though some may be unwilling to discharge the appropriate tasks of service: "For if I do this of mine own will, I have a reward: but if not of mine own will, I have a stewardship intrusted to me" (1 Cor. 9:17, ASV). All Christians as stewards have been entrusted with the Gospel of Christ; it is their duty to teach it to others without alteration. Peter wrote:

as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God giveth: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever. Amen (1 Pet. 4:10-11).

Faithfulness is the characteristic of stewards which is required, and faithfulness will be the quality which will bring rich rewards from the Master. Paul wrote, "Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful" (1 Cor. 4:2). In the text of this parable Jesus states, "Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing. Of a truth I say unto you, that he will make him ruler over all that he hath" (Luke 12:43-44). The Lord will bless His steward whom He finds at His coming faithfully carrying out the tasks entrusted to him (i.e. "so doing").

Being made "ruler over all that he hath" is not to be taken literally. This terminology is used to suggest the

abundant, glorious blessings which will be given the faithful and wise stewards when the Lord returns: “If there is any one Christian today that imagines he will some day be appointed general manager over all the Lord’s business, he is deluding himself.”⁸

The Unfaithful Servant And His Punishment (vv. 45-46)

A faithful servant will faithfully discharge his responsibilities whether his Lord’s return is early or late. However, in contrast, the unfaithful steward sees the delay of his Lord as an opportunity to manifest his wickedness. The steward having charge of his Lord’s affairs had other servants under his authority.

The process of evil for the unfaithful servant begins by saying things “in his heart” (Luke 12:45). Oftentimes those things that a person says to himself are more important than what is said openly. Remember, the rich fool, mentioned earlier in this chapter, began his progress down the wrong path by first thinking “within himself, saying” (Luke 12:17): “For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he” (Prov. 23:7).

The unfaithful servant’s ideas are similar to those expressed in 2 Peter 3:4, “And saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation.” This servant, in essence, reasons: “It has been a long, long time since the Master left, and it will be yet a long time before he returns. Therefore, I can do what I want to do and throw my weight around.” So just for fun he began to beat up the male and female slaves who were under his charge. He started to revel—eating and drinking to drunkenness. His mistake was the same as the rich fool’s. He thought he had plenty of time. No doubt, he believed

that he had time to mistreat his fellow servants, eat and drink to excess, and then have time to straighten out his life before his Lord returned.

All of a sudden and without warning the Master returns. Because of the Lord's discovery of the unfaithful discharge of the steward's duties, he is severely punished. He is "cut in sunder." This indicates severe punishment. It sounds strange to modern ears, but this kind of punishment was used in previous civilizations. For example, Samuel, when he discovered that Saul had spared the life of king Agag contrary to the commandment of God, cut "Agag in pieces before the Lord in Gilgal" (1 Sam. 15:33). Nebuchadnezzar threatened the Chaldeans who could not tell him what he wanted to know: "if ye will not make known unto to me the dream, with the interpretation thereof, ye shall be cut in pieces, and your houses shall be made a dunghill" (Dan. 2:5). After the miraculous escape of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the fiery furnace, Nebuchadnezzar made a similar threat in the form of a decree concerning those people, or nations, who would speak against the God of the three Hebrews (3:29). The great chapter of faith also refers to those who because of their faith in God "were sawn asunder" (Heb. 11:37).

"His portion" is here said to be "with the unbelievers" (Luke 12:46). In Matthew's account, his portion is with the "hypocrites," and we are told that "there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 24:51). The phrase "weeping and gnashing of teeth" expresses the extreme anguish of those who thus are punished.

Punishment Of The Disobedient (vv. 47-48)

In these verses, the disobedient servant, whether knowing his Master's will or ignorant of it, is going to be punished (lost). The one who knows the Master's will and intentionally disobeys will be beaten with "many stripes";

the one who does not know the Master's will and disobeys will be beaten with "few stripes." But both will be punished! The comments of Adam Clarke on these verses are appropriate here:

The subject of the forty-seventh and forty-eighth verses has been greatly misunderstood, and has been used in a very dangerous manner. Many have thought that their ignorance of divine things would be sufficient excuse for their crimes; and that they might have but few stripes, they voluntarily continued in ignorance. But such persons should know that God will judge them for the knowledge they might have received, but refused to acquire. No criminal is excused, because he has been ignorant of the law of his country, and so transgressed them; when it can be proved that those very laws have been published throughout the land. Much knowledge however is a dangerous thing, if it be not improved; as this will greatly aggravate the condemnation of the possessor. Nor will it avail a person, in the land of light and information to be ignorant, as he shall be judged for what he might have known, and, perhaps, in this case, the punishment of this voluntarily ignorant man will be even greater than that of the more enlightened; because his crimes are aggravated by this consideration, that he refused to have the light that he might be obliged to walk in the light, nor account for the possession of it. So we find that the plea of ignorance is a mere refuge of lies and none can plead it who has the book of God within his reach, and lives in a country blessed with the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.⁹

"Stripes" in this passage clearly refers to punishment in the afterlife, beyond the grave. The number of these stripes suggests degrees of punishment. All of those who disobey will be lost and suffer punishment, but some more than others, depending on their knowledge and opportunity in this life. The righteous will not receive any stripes.

To labor under the false notion that those who have never heard the Gospel will be saved in their ignorance may salve the conscience now, but it will not remove the responsibility to carry the saving message of Christ to “every creature” and “all nations” (Mark 16:15; Matt. 28:19). One day there will be an accounting given by everyone who has lived. Ignorance of God’s Word will not excuse: “For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more” (Luke 12:48b).

Conclusion

Though the Parables of the Wise and Faithful Servants are not as well known by most, as some of the other parables our Lord taught, these parables should be studied and profited from. Note these lessons gleaned from these parables:

1. The servants of the Lord need to be constantly ready (prepared and watchful) for the Lord’s return.
 2. When the Lord returns, there will be no opportunity then to prepare.
 3. Great blessings are going to be given those who are faithful when the Lord returns.
 4. The Lord’s return is going to be without warning signs, as a thief comes, and it may be longer before He comes than many think.
 5. The Lord’s delay in coming **does not allow** time for us to mistreat others or to live for the pleasures of the flesh.
 6. There will be degrees of punishment experienced by the disobedient, determined by the knowledge of God’s Word they have had and the opportunity to obey.
 7. All disobedient will be lost and will suffer eternal punishment.
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Endnotes

1 All Scripture quotations are from the King James Version unless otherwise noted.

2 Albert Barnes, **Notes on the New Testament (Luke and John)** (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1965), p. 83.

3 Because of the fact that in these parables the “lord” and the “master” refer in the application to Jesus, Lord and Master will be used throughout except in direct Scripture quotations.

4 Robertson L. Whiteside, **Annual Lesson Commentary on Bible School Lessons 1940** (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1939), p. 292.

5 William Hendriksen, **New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke** (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978), p. 678.

6 Ibid.

7 Whiteside, pp. 292-293.

8 Whiteside, p. 293.

9 Quoted in Whiteside, p. 294.

CHAPTER 33

The Parables Of The New Garment And The New Wine

Billy Bland

Introduction

APPRECIATION IS EXTENDED TO the elders, deacons, preachers, and all who work so diligently to make the **POWER** Lectureship such a great success. The past lectures have been of tremendous value to the Cause of Christ. Looking over the theme of this year's lectureship reveals that this series of lectures will be no exception!

The parables found in the Bible are a rich and rewarding study. Jesus, the Master Teacher, often made use of this form of teaching. The word "parable" comes:

from the two Greek words, **para**, beside, and **ballein**, to throw; hence a placing beside or together, a comparing, comparison: a story by which something real in life is used as a means of presenting a moral thought.¹

A parable takes some known truth and places it beside the truth one is attempting to teach so that those who desire to know the truth can more readily ascertain the intended meaning.

Most Bible students are familiar with such parables of Jesus as the parable of the sower, the parable of the

Good Samaritan, etc. These are great truths that teach us vital lessons. However, a couple of parables that are perhaps less known (at least, their meaning) are the parables of the new garment and the new wine. These two parables are located in Matthew 9:16-17; Mark 2:21-22; and Luke 5:36-38. Although recorded in the above three passages, Luke is the only one that explicitly calls them a “parable.” He writes:

And he spake also a parable unto them; No man putteth a piece of a new garment upon an old; if otherwise, then both the new maketh a rent, and the piece that was taken out of the new agreeth not with the old. And no man putteth new wine into old bottles; else the new wine will burst the bottles, and be spilled, and the bottles shall perish. But new wine must be put into new bottles; and both are preserved.

The Occasion Of The Parables

What precipitated the need for these parables? Why did Jesus give them? The background for these parables is seen in Luke 5:33: “And they said unto him, Why do the disciples of John fast often, and make prayers, and likewise the disciples of the Pharisees; but thine eat and drink?” Matthew reveals that, specifically, it was the disciples of John who asked the question (cf. Matt. 9:14). They wanted to know why Jesus’ disciples did not follow the custom or tradition that the disciples of John and the Pharisees followed, relative to fasting. Regarding this, J. Noel Meredith observed:

The disciples of John the Baptist, who formed a separate group for some time, and the Pharisees, fasted. Under the law (sic) of Moses, fasting was compulsory for all Jews only on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 23:27; Matt. 6:16), but in the first century the Jews had reached a time when they had more fasts. They fasted on the

anniversaries of some calamities that had befallen the Jewish people and still other fasts were proclaimed if the autumn rains had not come by November. Pharisees, exceeding the demands of the law of Moses, fasted twice in the week (Luke 8:12)—on Mondays and Thursdays. The disciples of John and Pharisees came to Jesus and asked, “**Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but thy disciples fast not?**” Jesus had not required His disciples to fast, but He had taught them (Matt. 6:16) that the practice of fasting should spring from spiritual motives and should not be an occasion for display.²

Relative to the question that was asked by these, Ken Hope stated:

Keep in mind that the disciples of John represent an altogether different group from the former querists. While the Pharisees were nothing more than hypocrites, blind guides, fools, and serpents (Matt. 23:13, 16, 17, 33 respectively), John’s disciples were sincere men who were genuinely perplexed on this occasion....Certainly John’s disciples had reason to fast since John had already been taken into custody (Matt. 14:12-14). Therefore, they wanted to know how it was that Jesus and His disciples could eat and drink while they fasted and prayed (Luke 5:33).³

The disciples of John may have indeed been saddened and sincere in their question, but no doubt the Pharisees were more interested in keeping their manmade traditions than being saddened over any spiritual problem. And while the disciples of John were genuinely contrite over John’s imprisonment, they should also understand that John was paving the way for the Messiah. This, of course, does not imply that they could not fast over John’s arrest, for indeed he was a great man of God, but John declared that he was not the Christ—he was the friend of the bridegroom:

Ye yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him. He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease (John 3:28-30).

The Explanation

Jesus answers their question by stating:

Can ye make the children of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days (Luke 5:34-35).

A wedding was a time of feasting, not fasting (John 2)! It was a time of rejoicing (3:29)! Can you picture how **out of place** it would be even today for one to refuse to eat and or drink at a wedding because he was fasting? There would not be much rejoicing by the bride and groom if everyone at the "feast" was fasting? Fasting was usually done in times of sorrow or sadness. Jesus, however, was with His disciples. The message that He was bringing was one of hope and that created joy. He spoke of life, joy, peace, forgiveness, heaven, etc. **Why should His disciples "fast"?**

However, He did observe; "But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days" (Luke 5:35). When Jesus is "taken away," then it will be time for His disciples to "fast." There would be a time of sadness and sorrow for them. Notice that he would be "taken away." This is an allusion to His death. He did not simply "go away," but He would be "taken away."

Jesus then sets forth the parables of the new garment and the new wine:

And he spake also a parable unto them; No man putteth a piece of a new garment upon an old; if otherwise, then both the new maketh a rent, and the piece that was taken out of the new agreeth not with the old (v. 36).

It was common for clothes to shrink after they were washed. Therefore, any wise person would not patch a garment by putting a piece of a new garment upon an old garment. The new piece would shrink when the garment was washed, and the new would make a rent in the garment. Notice that our Savior observed, “and the piece that was taken out of the new agreeth not with the old.” It is interesting to observe that the two did not agree! Neither did Jesus’ teaching and practice agree with the human traditions of the Pharisees!:

To force the Lord’s disciples to conform to the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees is compared to an attempt to add a new piece of garment to an old. The two were of different quality material. If attached to the old, the new would rend a larger hole than already existed. The two materials were not compatible.⁴

Jesus continued:

And no man putteth new wine into old bottles; else the new wine will burst the bottles, and be spilled, and the bottles shall perish. But new wine must be put into new bottles; and both are preserved (vv. 37-38).

In order to understand this parable, one first needs to understand the nature of the “bottles” in the text. The “bottles” were actually “wine-skins” (ASV), and not bottles as we think of them. The “wineskins” were made from the skin of an animal (usually a goat and, in some fashion, made into a bottle for the purpose of holding liquids. No one would put new wine (fresh juice of the grape) into old

wineskins, lest fermentation take place in the old wineskins that were already stretched and, perhaps, somewhat brittle; then both the new wine and the old wineskin would perish.

But again, why put new wine in new wineskins?

Most commentators state that the wine in the old skins had already fermented and then, when the new wine in the old skins began to ferment, the old skins would burst. This much is true. However, they then observe that the new wine must be placed in new wineskins so that, when fermentation takes place, the new skins can stretch and thereby accommodate the now fermented wine, which the old skins could not do, already stretched to their fullest capacity. Those that so reason are assuming that the new wine **in the new wineskins** will ferment. To the contrary, Mr. William Patton comments:

The new bottles or skins, being clean and perfectly free from all ferment, were essential for preserving the fresh unfermented juice, not that their strength might resist the force of fermentation, but, being clean and free from fermenting matter, and closely tied and sealed, so as to exclude the air, the wine would be preserved in the same state in which it was when put into those skins.⁵

If Mr. Patton is correct, then, by putting the new wine in new wineskins, the new wine would remain new (fresh) and unfermented! This certainly fits the context. Jesus' doctrine will always remain fresh (new). It is never out of date! But someone may ask, if the above is true, then why not put the new wine in the old wineskin and seal it? The answer is that the old wineskins evidently previously contained fermented wine or at least the properties that caused fermentation, and, when the oxygen would get into this skin, the new wine would ferment and the skin would burst:

I have said, if the “new wine” had already fermented, the old bottles would suit just as well as the new; but, if not fermented, the old would not suit, not because they were weak, but because they would have portions of the albuminous matter or yeast adhering to the sides. This, having absorbed oxygen from the air, would become active fermenting matter, and would communicate it to the entire mass. Liebig informs us that “fermentation depends upon the access of air to the grape-juice, the gluten of which absorbs oxygen and becomes ferment, communicating its own decomposition to the saccharine matter of the grapes.”⁶

If a person in the first century wanted to preserve sweet wine (fresh), and not allow it to ferment, he would use the method of putting it in a new container: “Columella, who lived in the days of the Apostles, in his recipe for keeping the wine ‘**always sweet,**’ expressly directs the newest must be put in a ‘**new amphora,**’ or jar.”⁷

The application of the parable should be obvious. Jesus’ teaching is not mixed with the traditions and practices of men. To do so would “burst the old.” Neither is Jesus’ doctrine contaminated with the doctrines of men. It is pure and undefiled (unfermented!). Neither Judaism nor the traditions of men can be kept by patching the new onto the old. It is not new wine in old wineskins! Jesus’ covenant is indeed the “New Testament” (or “covenant”). Jesus did not come to “patch up” the old; He came to give us a new covenant: “For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Matt. 26:28). Jeremiah, many years earlier, had foretold of this “new covenant”:

Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand

to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the Lord: But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more (Jer. 31:31-34).

Jesus' teaching will always remain "new." Because of this "new covenant," man can be a "new creature" (2 Cor. 5:17). He has put on a "new man" (Eph. 4:24), and has hope for the "new heavens and new earth" in the "new Jerusalem" (Rev. 21:1-2). Indeed, God makes all things "new" (21:5). Why would anyone want a new patch on an old garment or want to put new wine in old wineskins, when he can have all things "new!": "The religion of God's dear Son is not merely Judaism under the caption '**new and improved**' but a new and different covenant altogether (Matt. 5:17-18; Matt. 26:28; Jer. 31-34; Heb. 8:6-12; 1 Pet. 1:10-12)."⁸

Applications For Today

As stated earlier, the teaching of Christ is always new and fresh. This parable is just as applicable today as in the first century. What are some lessons for us?

It is easy to become tradition bound. The Pharisees had made a tradition of fasting often. It is noteworthy that God had not commanded them to fast as they did. They had made it practice, however, to fast twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays. Some of them had become "self-righteous," which was based partly on their fasting:

And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted (Luke 18:9-14).

People wanted to know why Jesus' disciples did not fast like the Pharisees and the disciples of John. They thought it **odd** that Jesus' disciples did not follow what the others were doing. Keep in mind that what we are making application to now are human traditions and practices not commanded (or in many cases not authorized) by God. We are **not** talking about not following the "change agents," who seek to loose where **God** has bound. But we are talking about people who bind human traditions and then want others to follow their long-standing practices.

People may think it **odd** that members of the church of Christ do not use mechanical instruments of music in their worship to God. In fact, sometimes we are asked, "Why do you not use music in your church?" Of course, members of the church of Christ do use music in their worship, but it is vocal music, as commanded by God: "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord" (Eph. 5:19). A better question could (and should) be asked to those that do use instrumental music in their

worship: “since God said to **sing** (a specific type of music) in every passage that deals with New Testament music in worship, why, then, do you use the instrument?” We must do all things “in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Col. 3:17). Many have “grown up” in a church that uses mechanical, instrumental music in worship and have never questioned its scripturalness. It is a tradition, and they think it is odd that others do not use it. Other examples of human traditions could be cited. But what all need to realize is that human tradition that violates the will of God makes our worship vain: “And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition” (Mark 7:9). He also stated that the Jews were “making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered: and many such like things do ye” (7:13).

It is quite easy to simply accept things in religion as being scriptural because of long standing practice. One, however, needs to ask, “Is it authorized?”

Another important principle with which this parable deals is, even if a matter is authorized, unless God has made it obligatory, one should not bind it on others. It may have been scriptural for the disciples of John to “fast,” but God did not command it. Neither did Jesus command it, but He did regulate it (Matt. 6:16ff). It is scriptural for one to read his Bible on Mondays and Tuesdays mornings at 6:30 A.M. However, one cannot bind on others that they **must** read their Bibles on Mondays and Tuesdays mornings at 6:30 A.M. Things that are optional are not to be made obligatory.

The New Testament is distinct from the Old Testament. As stated earlier, Jesus did not come simply to “patch up” the old covenant. The old covenant was given of God, and it served its purpose and then was taken out

of the way. Paul refers to it as a “schoolmaster” to bring one to Christ and then it was taken away:

Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster (Gal. 3:24-25).

Jesus Himself said:

Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled (Matt. 5:17-18).

Jesus, having fulfilled the Law of Moses, took it away: “Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross” (Col. 2:14).

Many today have not yet learned this important distinction. They continue to turn to the Old Testament to justify an item of New Testament worship (example: instrumental music). All must realize that today we are not under the Old Testament as our covenant. Surely, there are principles that are found in the Old Testament from which we can learn (Rom. 15:4), but it is not our covenant. We are under the new covenant:

Then said he, Lo, I come to do thy will, O God. He taketh away the first, that he may establish the second. By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all (Heb. 10:9-10).

The Gospel of Christ is not a patch to any denominational system.⁹ Denominations believe and practice some parts of the Gospel. However, one cannot “piecemeal” the Gospel. Neither can one accept the part of

the Gospel with which he agrees and discard the rest. God does not take lightly anyone that alters His Gospel:

I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed (Gal. 1:6-9).

Someone has observed that “rat poison” for the most part is good. However, it is that small dosage of poison that can harm one. One cannot alter the Word of God and expect to be saved. It is not enough to accept “part” of the Bible:

For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book (Rev. 22:18-19).

But he answered and said, Every plant, which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up (Matt. 15:13).

The matter of fasting: Since Jesus gave this parable in response to a question as to why His disciples did not fast, it is appropriate that something is stated regarding the practice of fasting. When one studies the Bible on this subject, he sees that it was something that was done, for the most part, in response to some calamity

or of one who was contrite in heart. Seemingly, it was commanded in the Old Testament only once, that being on the Day of Atonement. There were other times, however, that some did fast. Jesus warned against the hypocritical fasting which was characteristic of some who disfigured their faces so that others could see they were fasting (Matt. 6:16-18). Christ did not command fasting, but He did regulate it. In fact, He pointed out that fasting was out of place among His disciples as long as He was in their presence. Rather than fasting, they should be joyous (Luke 5:34-35). However, when the sad occasion would come that He would be taken away from their midst, that would be a time characteristic for fasting. On some occasions, it would be natural, such as when a tragedy strikes. It is not a command for Christians today. If it is practiced, it is not to be done so to be seen of men.¹⁰

Conclusion

The parables of the new garment and new wine are rich in meaning. One stands amazed at the power of the teaching of Jesus in the parables. The Master Teacher could in just a few words state invaluable, eternal truths. May we appreciate the fulness and depth of the teaching of Jesus Christ through His use of the parables. Truly, “Never man spake like this man” (John 7:46).

Endnotes

1 D. R. Dungan, **Hermeneutics** (Delight, AR: Gospel Light Publishing), p. 227.

2 J. Noel Meredith, “Jesus in Conflict—The Perfect Defender of God and His Word,” **The Book of Mark**, (Pulaski, TN, Sain Publications, 1989), pp. 92-93.

3 Ken Hope, “The Tempest Stilled; A Paralytic Cured; Matthew Called; Cure of the Ruler’s Daughter; Of Two Blind Men,” **The Book of Matthew** (Pulaski, TN: Sain Publications, 1988), pp. 298-299.

4 Jerry Martin, "The Saviour's Calling," **Luke: "That You May Understand The Saviour,"** (Austin: Firm Foundation, 1988), p. 136.

5 William Patton, **Bible Wines** (Fort Worth: Star Bible, 1981), p. 79.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Hope, p. 300.

9 W. Gaddys Roy, **Sermon Outlines on the Parables of Jesus** (Anniston, AL: W. Gaddys Roy, 1974), p. 136.

10 For additional information on fasting I recommend Guy N. Woods, **Questions and Answers**, Volume 1 (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1976), pp. 252-255.

CHAPTER 34

The Parable That Is Not A Parable

Gary Summers

Introduction

Woe to you who are at ease in Zion....Woe to you who put far off the day of doom, who cause the seat of violence to come near; Who lie on beds of ivory, stretch out on your couches, eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall; Who chant to the sound of stringed instruments, and invent for themselves instruments like David; Who drink wine from bowls, and anoint yourselves with the best ointments, but are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph (Amos 6:1, 3-6).¹

WHAT MORE PERTINENT MESSAGE could be preached today to America (and worldly members of the Lord's church)? In the past forty years, a nation that once lived largely by Biblical precepts has slid from its lofty moral perch into a cesspool of moral slime. Just thirty years ago abortions could not be legally obtained, homosexuals were not parading through the streets of our cities (sometimes committing shameless acts in the process), and three most recent Academy Award-winning movies did not feature some starlet's naked chest. Why have once-decent people allowed this nation to descend to its current low level? Perhaps the reason is the same one that caused Americans

to defend a President who openly lied to them as well as to this nation's courts. In affluent times people will tolerate all manner of wickedness.

Prosperity has crippled us. It is not that we are blind to the reality of evil in our world; we are just not motivated enough to care about changing our condition. The pleasures and comforts of this world have immobilized us. We have become paralyzed—not by fear but by a lack of will. Like those in Laodicea, this nation thinks that it is wealthy and has need of nothing, failing to realize that we are “wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked” (Rev. 3:17). Prosperity has led to inaction. The poet T. S. Eliot may not have envisioned a nation mesmerized by baubles to the point of lethargy regarding its future, but the following words could have prophesied of us:

This is the way the world ends.
This is the way the world ends.
This is the way the world ends.
Not with a bang—but a whimper.²

The Background Of The Non-Parable

Among the sects of the Jews were the Sadducees, who did not believe in angels or in the resurrection (Acts 23:8). They did, however, believe in wealth, and it may be that their materialistic philosophy caused them to compromise with whoever ruled them. They were eager to maintain the status quo (which also meant maintaining their wealth). They are not mentioned in Luke 16 (only in 20:27), but they too could certainly have benefited from the content of Jesus' teaching on this occasion.

When people are willing to put personal comfort and wealth above everything else and are willing to tolerate ungodly rulers and conditions of massive perversion and immorality, they have allowed themselves to become dominated by covetousness and stand in need of a powerful

rebuke. In Luke 16, Jesus fights against this self-centered outlook with strong arguments against self-indulgence.

He had previously in His ministry cautioned: "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses" (Luke 12:15). He had told of the rich, yet foolish, farmer (12:16-21). This illustration had been followed by His admonition to trust in God for food and clothing (12:22-34). The sixteenth chapter of Luke also deals with various aspects of covetousness.

Luke 16:1-8 is called "the parable of the unjust steward." The man is commended, not for being a thief, but for making the most advantageous use he can of material things. We should use the prosperity God has blessed us with in such a way that we are received "into everlasting habitations" (v. 9). After all, if we have "not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon," why should we be trusted with true riches (v. 11)? This section closes with Jesus saying, "No servant can serve two masters.... You cannot serve God and mammon" (v. 13).

Luke records that the Pharisees present were "lovers of money" (v. 14). What Jesus said next was not only applicable to them; it should serve as a serious warning to all of us: "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts" (v. 15). Few statements possess this much insight into human character. Is it not the case, for example, that no matter what ungodly occupation people choose (pornography publisher, prostitute, tavern owner, etc.), that they attempt to justify that choice to others? How many Christians repeatedly commit (what they know without a doubt to be) a sin? Nevertheless, they rationalize it to themselves.

The Lord knew that the hearts of the Pharisees were covetous. They coveted the kingdom so much (another material concept, in their minds) that they would take it

by force, if possible (vv. 16-17). They were also covetous for other people's mates, which is the reason they wanted to divorce and remarry for every cause (v. 18).³ Although they justified their actions to themselves, the fact is that they coveted wealth, a physical kingdom, and additional sexual partners. Sadly, they were completely and thoroughly covetous. Against this background Jesus now speaks of the rich man and Lazarus.

The Nature Of A Parable

The time for parables on this subject has ended: Jesus decides that He should speak plainly on this temptation to which the Pharisees have succumbed. The purpose of the Lord's teaching here is to show the upshot of this attitude that they had allowed to become ingrained in them. Stated briefly, lovers of money will be utterly and eternally lost in torment. The reader should be able to see that the clear and obvious point of Luke 16:19-31 is that a lifetime of covetousness reaps everlasting punishment. The point is not disguised or hidden in any way, which disqualifies this illustration from being a parable, but, since it is frequently so regarded, let us note the characteristics usually found in a parable.

The Word "Parable"

There are two words translated "parable" in the New Testament: **parabole** (the usual word) and **paroimia**. **Parabole** appears fifty times and is translated "parable" by the King James translators forty-six times. Once they assigned the meaning of "proverb" (Luke 4:23), once "comparison" (Mark 4:30), and twice "figure" (Heb. 9:9; 11:19). Except for these last two in Hebrews, **parabole** is found only in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.⁴ **Paroimia** is translated "parable" only once (John 10:6). On all other occasions it is translated "proverb" (twice in John 16:25, once in John 16:29, and once in 2 Peter 2:22).⁵

This same variation occurs in the Old Testament also. The Hebrew word **mashal** (Strong's 4912) is translated "parable(s)" sixteen times, "proverb(s)" seventeen times, and "byword" once (Psm. 44:14). A similar word [also spelled **mashal** (4911)] is also translated "proverb(s)" six times.

In this consideration of a parable, we will not concern ourselves with the definitions that relate to proverbial statements or the infrequent references to a simile, byword, or other types of comparisons. Our area of concentration will be upon the parable as it usually is thought of—a longer story with a moral. Following are some definitions, which may seem to be repetitive, but it is necessary to have as comprehensive a picture as possible in our minds in order to evaluate correctly whether or not Luke 16:19-31 is a parable.

Definitions

➤ Bromling: "parables are often defined as earthly stories with heavenly meanings."⁶

➤ Dungan: "hence a placing beside or together, a comparing, comparison; a story by which something real in life is used as a means of presenting a moral thought."⁷

➤ Vine: "denotes a placing beside (akin to **paraballo**, to throw or lay beside, to compare). It signifies a placing of one thing beside another with a view to comparison....It is generally used of a somewhat lengthy utterance or narrative drawn from nature or human circumstances, the object of which is to set forth a spiritual lesson....It is the lesson that is of value; the hearer must catch the analogy if he is to be instructed."⁸

➤ McClintock and Strong: "signifies to **set side by side**...for the purpose of **comparison**. A parable therefore is literally a placing beside, a comparison, a similitude, an illustration of one subject by another...a fictitious narrative, under which is veiled some important truth."⁹

➤ Darrell Conley: “Bernard Ramm points out that there are four elements to a parable. **First**, there is an earthly event, thing, or custom. This would be something very familiar to the audience. It might deal with business, farming, family, social events, etc. This earthly part of the parable must be rooted in reality. Events must actually happen or be capable of actually happening. **Second**, there is a spiritual lesson which the parable intends to teach. **Third**, the earthly element has an analogical relationship to the spiritual element. **Fourth**, because the parable has two levels of meaning, there is need of interpretation.”¹⁰

These few definitions should serve to get before us the important elements of a parable.

The Purpose Of A Parable

Dungan lists four purposes for a parable: (1) “To reveal truth: making the people to understand the unknown by a comparison with the known”; (2) “For the purpose of concealing truth from the minds of those who had no right to it, or who would abuse it if it were given to them”; (3) “They were made the means of embalming truth”; and (4) “for the purpose of causing men to assent to truth before they could know it certainly meant them.”¹¹

Dungan is consistent with what Jesus Himself said about His use of parables. When asked, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” (Matt. 13:10), Jesus answered that “seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand” (13:13). He then quotes Isaiah 6:9-10 (Matt. 13:14-15). In other words, the same material is available to all, but those with dull hearts, closed eyes, and hard-of-hearing ears will not comprehend the message.

Bromling points out that sometimes Jesus’ enemies **did** understand that He was speaking concerning them (Matt. 21:45; Mark 12:10-12),¹² which is true. In some matters He obviously wanted them to get the point, which

fits the criteria of Dungan's fourth purpose. Matthew 13 also contains parables that the disciples did not understand; they inquired of the Lord as to the meaning (Matt. 13:36). There are many spiritual truths that are gleaned only as a result of diligent study: "If you abide in my word, then are you my disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31-32).

But Jesus did not hide some things. His miracles spoke eloquently and unmistakably on His behalf. Teachings such as those found in Matthew 7:13-14 and 21-27 are plain. But when people really do not want to believe a teaching, in the final analysis it does not matter how obvious it is. Matthew 19:3-9 is clear, yet consider the number of ways those who call themselves Christians have tried to explain it away. Mark 16:16 is simple and evident as a verse can possibly be—that faith and baptism precede salvation, but most Baptists reject what is clearly revealed and can only talk about what the second part of the verse does *not* say instead of what the first part *does* say. The determining factor is whether or not someone has a love of the Truth (2 Thess. 2:10). Without the correct attitude, they will fail to understand the Scriptures, refuse to do so, or comprehend them but reject their meaning (due to a lack of faith). In any case, Jesus taught by means of parables in order to give His listeners an opportunity to "diligently seek Him" (Heb. 11:6).

The Text: Luke 16:19-31

Jesus begins with a contrast of two men. The one the Pharisees and Sadducees would admire is described in the following manner: "There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day" (Luke 16:19). Ah, this is the American dream, is it not? Who does not want to possess fine, elegant clothing

and dine in the best restaurants? This man was known by all as a wealthy man; like Richard Cory, he undoubtedly “glittered when he walked.”¹³

To these “lovers of money,” Jesus spoke about someone they all wanted to be. They were so shallow that, rather than value their relationship with God, which was genuine treasure, they coveted material things. How foolish to prize what is composed of earthly elements when the true riches are spiritual! They knew about God and His ways but were more captivated by the things of this world. Jesus has focused their attention on the kind of individual that they at heart wanted to be—rich.

Jesus next, however, calls forth the kind of man that nobody likes to be reminded of:

But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table, Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores (Luke 16:20-21).

How repulsive! Lazarus is the type of person that most of us hope we do not meet. He is an embarrassment to have around. He reminds us of the kind of person we pray we will never be. Even worse, he reminds us that, with but a few changes, we might actually be the person he is. We like to think of ourselves as healthy and self-sufficient, but here is a man who has become the one thing we fear most—dependent. Lazarus cannot make his own way in the world or pay for even the necessities. He has been reduced to the status of a beggar. It is not as though we really loathe him personally; we detest what has happened to him and what could happen to us. We prefer not to have visible reminders of the ravages of life and disease.

Here, then, are two extremes: a very wealthy man and a very poor man. If Jesus were speaking a parable,

these two men would represent and stand for something else. There is, however, no subtler meaning. The two men represent a rich man and a poor man—nothing else. Furthermore, in a parable they would either pursue a course of action, or they would be acted upon by others. In this instance they die: “So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by angels to Abraham’s bosom. The rich man also died and was buried” (Luke 16:22).

Again, no special significance springs to the mind of the reader. Jesus is relating a factual account; no symbolic meaning is suggested by their deaths. They underwent what all of us will someday experience (unless the Lord returns first)—their spirits departed from their bodies (Jas. 2:26). Although no metaphors are intended, Jesus states a fact that most of us do not want to face any more than Solomon did: death comes to us all. Neither wealth nor fame can avoid it: “The wise man’s eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. Yet I perceived that the same event happens to them all” (Eccl. 2:14).

Death does not end a person’s existence, nor are the departed rendered unconscious until the judgment. The angels came for the spirit of Lazarus. They were not ashamed of his poverty or his illness because the flesh is only temporary anyway: “man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7). If we were truly godlike, we would likewise ignore physical appearance in dealing with our fellow man and consider the heart. Lazarus receives an escort to Abraham’s bosom, where he can now be comforted.

The rich man received no such welcome; in his case we read the rather forlorn comment that he died and was buried. Undoubtedly, there were mourners and a lavish funeral. There could well have been a funeral procession and several friends who reminisced concerning what a successful man he was; some probably gave testimonials

concerning what a faithful child of Abraham he had been; perhaps a street was named in his honor. Jesus provides no details—because they are irrelevant. When the rich man dies, all of his wealth and earthly prowess end. The only remaining question with any pertinence is, “How will he fare now in eternity?”

He received no escort; we read: “And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom” (Luke 16:23). Is he in torment because he was rich? Such cannot be the reason because Abraham himself had been a rich man; he had 318 trained servants who were born in his house (Gen. 14:14). He refused a reward from the king of Sodom lest he should say, “I have made Abraham rich” (Gen. 14:23). Possessing wealth does not keep one out of heaven, but selfishness and a lack of compassion do (Jas. 2:15-16).

The rich man and Lazarus are both Jews; both men are under the covenant that God made with Israel through Moses. But the rich man lacks compassion; what he does not do to help a poor, sick man is unconscionable. He may have been very religious in fulfilling what the Law of Moses required, but he cared nothing for a fellow Israelite in obvious need. He is akin to the priest and the Levite who “passed by on the other side” (Luke 10:31-32). Certainly, he did not help Lazarus in his sickness (Matt. 25:36, 39). He was unwilling to help one of the least of his brethren and therefore will inherit the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels (25:41).

Even now he is tormented: “Then he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame” (Luke 16:24). Notice that he recognized both Abraham and Lazarus. We have no idea how he knew Abraham, but

Lazarus had eaten the crumbs from his table. How ironic to hear the unmerciful beg for mercy!

The rich man possesses the temerity to ask Lazarus to serve him. Perhaps it has not yet dawned on him that there are no aristocrats in eternity. The rich no longer possess wealth or the lofty station they enjoyed on earth. Lazarus is no longer a beggar or a servant. Both men have experienced reversals of fortune. Money, fame, and power may rule in the kingdoms of men, but, in the spiritual kingdom, the important things are character, humble worship of God, and devoted service. Lazarus is not saved because he was poor but because he pleased God.

“But Abraham said, Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented” (Luke 16:25). In a parable one thing stands for another. But the rich man’s wealth is literal, as is Lazarus’ poverty. They have both departed from the earth; one is being punished, and one is being rewarded, in accordance to what Jesus had already plainly taught (Mark 9:43-48) and would also later teach concerning the afterlife (Matt. 25:21, 23, 30, 41, 46). The reward and the punishment do not signify anything beyond reward and punishment.

Abraham finishes his refusal: “And besides all this, there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us” (Luke 16:26). The main point of this sentence is to convince us that, when we depart from this world, our new home will be **permanent**. No one will sneak out of one realm into the other; appeals for transfer will be denied. One cannot then repent in the hope that he will be released. The time for change and improvement is past.

The time to be compassionate, the time to listen to God’s Word, and the time to be obedient are before death. It is only afterward that the rich man considers

others: "I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment" (Luke 16:27-28). How much spiritual emphasis characterized the rich man before he died? We may safely conclude that he and his brothers did not study the Word of God together, or they would have encouraged one another to exercise compassion.

What do families do today? It is depressing to think that they might only participate jointly in school activities or watching television. Men need to lead their families in singing praises, prayer, and examining the Scriptures in the home. These things are productive of great good. How unfortunate that, perhaps, the rich man's father never exhorted him to thank God for his wealth and to use it for the spiritual purposes and the good of mankind! Apparently, he labored under the misconception that he deserved to have it (and that Lazarus deserved poverty).

Abraham denies the rich man's request: "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them" (Luke 16:29). What a novel idea: God meant what He said! Someone has bought space to put messages on billboards that ostensibly come from God. One of those reads: "You know that part about, 'love one another'? I really meant that." Of course He did, but what most people fail to understand is that He meant all the other parts, too. He meant that part about repenting of sins and being baptized for their forgiveness (Acts 2:38). God does not speak just to break the silence. He really meant Hosea 6:6: "For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings." While the rich man may have kept the sacrifices and paid tithes to God, he had displayed no mercy toward Lazarus. God delivered His Word to mankind; it is man's responsibility to hear and obey it.

The rich man, however, thinks he has a good answer to Abraham's negative reply: "No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent" (Luke 16:30). Forget that the rich man seeks special consideration for his brothers. After all, if one must return to the dead to preach to them, then does not every lost soul deserve the same treatment? Soon there would be no need for **live** preachers; the task could be turned over to those who have died. Paul could come back today and have a greater work than he ever had in his life.

But will the living listen to someone returning from the dead? Imagine Lazarus knocking on the door of the rich man's father's house, where his five brothers are. Supposing that he could gain entrance, what would he say? "I am Lazarus. I once ate the crumbs that fell from your brother's table; now I reside in Abraham's bosom. I have been sent to warn you to repent of your sins, to listen to Moses and the prophets, and be compassionate so that you don't go to torment, as your brother has." Do we really expect that the brothers would say, "Thank you, Lazarus"? Several scenarios might develop.

One brother suspects that this whole thing is a trick. Under Sadducean influence, he does not believe in spirits or the resurrection. He thinks that someone made himself to look like Lazarus to have some fun at their expense. A second brother is offended: "Who do you think you are to come to this august house and insinuate that there is something wrong with our godliness? Why, our brother was highly esteemed and greatly honored at his funeral." A third chimes in, "What right do you have to sully our brother's reputation and proclaim him to be suffering in torment? We're God's chosen people and certainly safe spiritually." A fourth adds: "Better to be in torment with my own flesh and blood than to spend eternity in the company of beggars." The fifth brother comments: "Surely,

you are a lying spirit. Our brother was a noble and stately personage, yet you tell me he is lost. I won't believe in a God who would punish a good man." Truly, as Abraham says, "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead" (Luke 16:31).

Having studied this text, what is the hidden or secret meaning? Who does the rich man represent besides rich, compassionless people? Who does Lazarus signify—except a poor but righteous man? Whom does Abraham represent besides himself? The Hadean realm does not fall within the realm of the natural world—something familiar to Jesus' listeners. Nor do the concepts of torment and rest symbolize anything; in the Scriptures others things may symbolize them (darkness and fire, for instance, on the negative side, the land of Canaan or the tree of life on the other). This teaching does not meet the basic definitions of a parable.

The Untold Parable

The rich man and Lazarus is a straightforward narrative with no concealed message. If Jesus had wanted to teach on the subject of the afterlife and keep the meaning somewhat obscured from His opponents, He might have used a real parable, such as the one that follows.

There was a certain man who owned a vineyard. He employed several servants to work his land while he kept the accounting of what was done. A man named Lazarus begged him periodically for work, but he steadfastly refused to hire him. One day, without warning, both men were carried away into captivity by an army from a country which bordered theirs. The owner of the vineyard was made to work in the valley where refuse was burned. He was tormented continually by the heat from the flames. Lazarus, however, was made a steward over some in a

certain territory and provided a cabin on a hillside far above the valley where the rich man labored.

One day, the owner of the vineyard looked up and saw Lazarus above him, sitting next to a cool mountain stream which wound through that hillside but flowed into another valley. With him was an ancestor he recognized, who (also in captivity) had been made a ruler of this kingdom. "I pray thee, good sir, send Lazarus down here with a cup of water, that I might be refreshed." "Before the captivity," came the reply, "you were constantly refreshed while Lazarus was in great distress. Now he is comforted, and you are afflicted. Besides, those who descend into this valley cannot return. He must remain where he is, and you will never have the strength to ascend to this position again."

"Please, good sir, send Lazarus back to my fathers' house. I have five brothers that need to be warned about being captured and sent to this place." His ancestor answered: "Warnings have been both spoken and written concerning this captivity." "Yes, but if one returned from the captivity to give firsthand knowledge of it, they would take this threat more seriously." "No. If they believe not the warnings they have seen and hear in that realm, they would not believe even if one returned from captivity."

Although it may be a poor facsimile, the above account is in the form of a parable. Although the owner of the vineyard is not called "rich," he is described as such, just as Lazarus is poor, since he cannot find a job. Being taken captive certainly falls within the Israelite memory, but here it stands for death. The valley (to the mind of the Jew) is Gehenna, a place of eternal torment, and the cabin on the hillside next to the cool stream represents Paradise. Abraham is not named, but he is identified as an ancestor who is a ruler of this realm. The warnings both written and spoken stand for the Word of God. Would the scribes

and Pharisees have perceived Jesus was talking about them, had he told this parable? Possibly they would have, if they put some effort forth in trying to comprehend it. But the point is that, although what is presented above is in the form of a parable, Luke 16:19-31 is not.

“Parable Rationale”

Why, then, is this teaching of the Lord’s frequently referred to as a parable? Some appear not to have an ulterior motive in labeling it as such. G. Campbell Morgan, for example, states decisively: “But if these were actual cases known to Jesus, that He used them parabolically there can be no doubt whatever.”¹⁴ Having concluded that the narrative is a parable, Morgan asks what Jesus was intending to illustrate, yet he never sets forth any interpretation other than the obvious. He correctly ties the meaning to Luke 16:13, “You cannot serve God and mammon,” but, while that observation explains the purpose for the illustration, it does not suggest a metaphoric interpretation. He further calls attention to the fact that they were “lovers of money” and their scoffing of Him.

He writes: “The Greek word is a strong one. It means not merely that they smiled, but with ribald mockery, they laughed at Him, mocked Him, at the idea of the relation between material and spiritual wealth.”¹⁵ He is exactly right, but his evidence fits the non-parable thesis, not his. Concerning verse 22, Morgan comments: “That is how it ends for all, you Pharisees, publicans and sinners, Christ might have said. Death is coming. Now draw the veil and look beyond.”¹⁶ When he asks what this story says to us, he answers: “Dying is the end of earthly and conscious opportunities and activities. Beyond that, however, personality and consciousness continue.”¹⁷

Again, Morgan understands the teaching of the passage and conveys it well, but he offers no proof for his

position that the passage contains a parable. The extent of his evidence is that Luke 16:1 and 16:19 both begin with the words, “There was a certain rich man.” The fact that the former verse is followed by a parable is supposed to imply somehow that the latter one must be also. As a historian, Luke also writes that there was “a certain priest named Zecharias” (1:5). A similarity in wording cannot substantiate the case in the absence of additional corresponding factors.

Most of those who argue in favor of the passage’s being a parable have ulterior motives—namely, a doctrine which conflicts with the narrative approach. Seventh-Day Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses, for example, do not believe in the Biblical concept of hell. They deny that conscious beings will suffer torment throughout eternity. Therefore, this passage **must** be explained. Seventh-Day Adventists and at least one brother that wrote for **Gospel Minutes** believe in the concept of psychopannychy (“soul sleeping”). Obviously, if the soul is unconscious after one dies, then we cannot take Luke 16:19-31 at face value; it **must** be a parable. Although these groups are in the wrong, they at least recognize that in a parable one thing must stand for another. Following are two explanations.

Interpretations Of The “Parable”

Jehovah’s Witnesses offer the following explanation for Luke 16:19-31:

In this illustration the rich man stood for the class of religious leaders who rejected and later killed Jesus. Lazarus pictures the common people who accepted God’s Son. The Bible shows that death can be used as a **symbol**, representing a great change in one’s life or course of action. (Compare Romans 6:2, 11-13; 7:4-6.) A death, or change from former conditions, happened when Jesus fed the Lazarus class spiritually, and they

came into the favor of the greater Abraham, Jehovah God. At the same time, the false religious teachers “died” with respect to having God’s favor. Being cast off, they suffered torments when Christ’s followers after Pentecost forcefully exposed their evil works (Acts 7:51-57). So this illustration does not teach that some dead persons are tormented in a literal fiery hell.¹⁸

If this were a dance step, it would be the Watchtower Shuffle. The following objections to such a wild interpretation must be offered.

1. Why would a rich man symbolize religious leaders? What connection exists between the two groups of people?

2. Why does Jesus give details about the rich man’s purple attire and his bountiful daily cuisine? What could they possibly symbolize? Such details are included to portray wealth—not religious leaders.

3. Lazarus does not represent common people—unless the average Jew was poverty-stricken and disease-laden. They were neither poor in the Scriptures or in physical sustenance.

4. On what basis is it determined that Lazarus represented those who accepted Jesus. Neither the acceptance nor denial of Jesus is to be found anywhere in this passage. They mocked what He had said about riches earlier, but the thrust of this entire chapter is covetousness—not the rejection of Jesus as Messiah.

5. God does require us to die unto sin; we have also become dead to the Law of Moses, as per the Scriptures cited above, but there exists no evidence that dying in this passage is used in such a metaphorical way. In none of those other texts does one’s dying to sin include an escort of angels to raise him to new life in Christ.

6. There is no “Lazarus class” fed by Jesus. Many of His disciples walked away and followed Him no more

(John 6:66-69). Just prior to Pentecost, the number of disciples was only 120. Nearly everyone rejected Him.

7. The religious teachers did not “die” with respect to God’s favor. Death is never used in this fashion anywhere in the Scriptures. They had already grown apart from God before Jesus ever came to earth. They had already substituted their traditions for the Word of God (Matt. 15:1-9) and were already hypocrites (ch. 23). Their character remained the same after Pentecost as before.

8. The Jehovah’s Witness interpretation must make the passage a prophecy; it is not fulfilled until Pentecost. Jesus had exposed their works long before that day.

9. They assert that no one is tormented in a fiery hell, but why then is such powerful imagery used? The rich man is tormented in flames, and he is seeking relief. When did the Pharisees seek any relief from Jesus, the apostles, or the “Lazarus class” that followed Jesus?

10. How does the request to save the five brothers by means of sending one back from the dead fit in? How can Lazarus rise from the dead in this analogy? This alleged “class of people died (changed from their former conditions) to accept the Word of God.” If they are to rise from the dead, then they must go back to their former state. How can that be? Obviously, someone devised a fanciful theory in order to avoid a meaning that is obvious to nearly anyone.

Yet this thoroughly erroneous and inconsistent explanation of Luke 16:19-31 seems logical when compared to the doctrine of the Seventh-Day Adventists:

We believe the story is a parable, which was the usual method Christ employed in His teaching, even though here, as in various other instances, He does not specifically so state. We therefore seek to find just what lesson Christ was trying to teach....Christ drove home the one primary lesson, that the reward awaiting the covetous

rich, who have naught but crumbs for the poor, was the very opposite of what the Jews believed.¹⁹

Like Morgan, this explanation is correct concerning the main point Jesus makes, but that affirmation does not explain the parable to us. Additionally, the limitation of the Lord's teaching to just one point causes the last six verses to be irrelevant or devoid of meaning. They continue: "By employing the language of allegory He could very properly have the unconscious dead carry on a conversation without necessitating the conclusion that the dead are conscious."²⁰ What??? How do unconscious souls have conversations? This alleged action does not constitute a parable—but rather an impossibility. A person ought to be embarrassed to suggest something so absurd.

Evidence Against The "Parable" Notion

Following is a summary of the reasons for concluding that Luke 16:19-31 is not a parable:

1. None of the parables ever uses the name of an individual, but this one mentions an apparently flesh-and-blood individual named Lazarus. Then why not call the name of the rich man also? The answer to that question may be two-fold: (1) If the people knew Lazarus, they would probably know who the rich man was also; (2) Avoiding the use of his name preserves a measure of sensitivity.

2. "The Hadean world described by Jesus is not derived from human experience."²¹ Yet all the parables Jesus used were drawn from everyday life. They are, as cited earlier, "earthly stories with heavenly meanings," "a story by which something real in life is used as a means of presenting a moral thought," "drawn from nature or human circumstances," and "something very familiar to the audience." The Hadean realm does not meet these criteria. No one had a **reliable** picture of the afterlife until Jesus

drew back the veil to give them a glimpse. So far from drawing upon **nature** to teach a moral lesson, Jesus presents them a picture of the **supernatural**: “Parables are not fables. Parables are earthly stories with spiritual and heavenly meanings or applications.”²²

3. No one has rendered an interpretation for the passage that makes sense. Those offered run the gamut from totally speculative to downright preposterous. To be sure, some have acknowledged that the main point of the illustration is to show the folly of being a lover of money, but that truth does not explain anything about the conversation between the rich man and Abraham that follows. A parable must not only stem from common human experience; the hearer (or reader) must be able to draw the important moral truth it is designed to convey. In other words, what is the second level of meaning—the one beneath the surface? The teachings of the rich man and Lazarus, while many and powerful, do not contain anything other than straightforward teaching. No deeper, hidden meaning exists, in which one thing signifies another.

What The Non-Parable Teaches

In His teaching about the rich man and Lazarus, however, Jesus sets forth some of the most sobering and thought-provoking truths that man can ever consider. Following are a baker’s dozen of them.

1. Our own material possessions and personal comfort can make us spiritually lethargic and blind to even the crucial needs of others.

2. Wealth may cause us to be lifted up with pride; we run the risk of thinking that we deserve our abundance while others merit their poverty.

3. Our prosperity may, in our minds, constitute proof that we have found favor with God, but we should realize that the wicked are also blessed. (Matt. 5:45).

4. We should learn that there is a terrible price to pay for lacking compassion (25:31-46).

5. While the rich man learned how to enjoy this life, he was unprepared for the next (Cf. Luke 16:1-13).

6. Death comes to all, regardless of wealth and earthly advantages.

7. Although the body dies, the spirit lives on (Jas. 2:26). The doctrines of annihilation and soul-sleeping are not found in the Scriptures.

8. We are assigned an eternal abode, in which there resides either great pleasure or great torment.

9. There can be no relief or abatement from the punishment God assigns.

10. No one can escape the punishment of hell, once he has been assigned to that realm. All doctrines of a second chance are wrong (premillennialism, purgatory, reincarnation, et al.).

11. Repentance will avail nothing then; no improvement will be forthcoming.

12. It will be too late to think of family members and loved ones upon whom we might have had a positive influence. Lost opportunities cannot be regained.

13. The Word of God is sufficient to prepare us for and encourage us toward eternal life (2 Peter 1:3; 2 Tim. 3:16-17). Personal testimonies cannot supplant the gospel of Christ. Miracles cannot replace the message. Our lives cannot be governed by communications from beyond.

Conclusion

Now is the only opportunity we have to make the proper preparation for eternity. If we expect to **receive** compassion after we depart this life, we must now **extend** it. Not only is this true with respect to the physical needs of others; it also applies to their spiritual needs. Will we provide food, clothing, and shelter for people but leave their

souls in jeopardy? Compassion means that we also find ways to feed them the bread of life, through which people can receive true sustenance (Matt. 4:4).

Hell is a place where mercy is literally absent; it will only exist in the memories of those who refused it while the opportunity afforded itself. If we could experience the torment of the rich man for only five minutes, it would suffice to unleash in us all the zeal we could muster. We would then devote ourselves to personal righteousness, evangelism, the church, and those in need. The things of this world would lose their charm as we realized what was genuinely important.

Heaven is a place that will exceed all of our expectations. If we could spend five minutes with Lazarus, all of our mental cobwebs would dissolve and we would be motivated to bring as many as possible with us to that grand habitation, wherein dwell the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. May God grant that the descriptions of Luke 16:19-31 inspire us in the absence of these experiences.

Endnotes

1 All Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version unless otherwise specified.

2 T. S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men" (published over seventy-five years ago).

3 Ephesians 5:5 and Colossians 3:5 both mention covetousness in the context of sexual sin. See also Exodus 20:17; Jeremiah 5:8; and Jeremiah 13:27.

4 The verb form of the word (**paraballo**) is translated "compare" in Mark 4:30 and "arrived" in Acts 20:15. These are its only two New Testament appearances.

5 The same word appears once as a verb (translated "like unto" in Matthew 23:27) and twice as an adjective (translated "like" in Mark 7:8, 13).

6 Brad T. Bromling, "The Definition, Nature, and Purpose of the Parables," **The Parables of our Lord**, eds. M. Floyd

Bailey, Jr., Mark A Howell, & Allen Webster (Montgomery, AL: Faulkner University, 1994), p. 17.

7 D. R. Dungan, **Hermeneutics** (Delight, AR: Gospel Light), p. 227.

8 W. E. Vine, **An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words** (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1966), 3:158.

9 McClintock and Strong, **Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature** (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), 7:643.

10 Bernard Ramm, **Protestant Biblical Interpretation** (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970, pp. 278-279, as quoted by Darrell Conley, "Parables," **Rightly Dividing the Word: Volume II—Special Hermeneutics**, ed. Terry M. Hightower (San Antonio: Shenandoah church of Christ, 1991), p. 280.

11 Dungan, pp. 230-31.

12 Bromling, p. 22.

13 "Richard Cory" is a poem written by Edward Arlington Robinson in 1897, in which the title character has everything that money could buy but commits suicide.

14 G. Campbell Morgan, **The Parables and Metaphors of our Lord** (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1943), p. 222.

15 Ibid, p. 223.

16 Ibid, p. 225.

17 Ibid, p. 226.

18 **The Truth That Leads to Eternal Life** (Brooklyn: Watch Tower Bible & Tract Society, 1968), p. 43.

19 Francis D. Nichol, **Answers To Objections** (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1952), p. 358.

20 Ibid.

21 Gary W. Summers, "Soul-Sleeping," **Whatever Happened To Heaven and Hell?**, ed. Terry M. Hightower (San Antonio, TX: Shenandoah church of Christ, 1993), p. 560.

22 Ted J. Clarke, "Soul-Sleeping/Materialism Error," **God Hath Spoken, Affirming Truth and Reproving Error**, ed. Curtis A. Cates (Memphis: Memphis School of Preaching, 1999), p. 725.

CHAPTER 35

The Parable Of The Creditor And Two Debtors

Jesse Whitlock

Introduction

IT IS A SIGNAL honor to be invited to speak on the 8th Annual **POWER** lectures. I am humbled by the invitation to participate on this lectureship. Allow me to express a solid note of appreciation to brother B. J. Clarke and the elders for this opportunity. When I began to look for works by faithful brethren dealing with the parables, it was a little disappointing. Therefore, this lectureship book will fill a great void in that area of study.

The plain, powerful, profitable parables of Christ never grow old. They are as fresh as the morning dew. The parables never cease to challenge our thinking. It is my conviction that the Gospel of Matthew contains fourteen parables; Mark gives us only four; and Luke rehearses seventeen parables from our Lord's ministry. In a listing of parables by Luke, the first recorded is that of the creditor and the two debtors.

The parables of Christ are true to life. They either happened, or they could have happened. Being figures of speech, all the parables require interpretation. Remember, anything that can be interpreted can also be misinterpreted! Therefore, let us recall a few basics of interpretation from Hermeneutics 101:

1. Look for an introduction at the start of the parable or an application at the end.

2. Examine the context (setting) of the parable. What is said or done to cause Christ to relate the particular parable? The answer to that question often makes His main lesson obvious.

3. Never force a parable to mean what you would have it to mean. Christ used the parabolic form of teaching to make the Truth easily understood. If one has to use ingenious explanations and fanciful theories to arrive at an interpretation of any portion of Scripture, then you must be trying to force it to mean something that it was never intended to teach.

4. As I learned from older preachers as a boy preacher, any **text** taken out of its **context** ceases to be a **text** and becomes a mere **pretext**!

The Occasion Of The Parable

Luke provides not only the powerful parable, but also the context from which it sprang (Luke 7:36-50). The pointed parable is recorded in Luke 7:41-43.

Christ had been invited into the home of Simon, a Pharisee. Do not confuse this Simon with Simon the leper (Matt. 26:6; Mark 14:3; John 12:1-3). The anointing in John chapter 12 involved Mary, the sister of Lazarus (John 11:2). This is another incident of Christ being anointed.

In Luke 7:37-38, an unnamed woman, a sinner ["For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23)¹], was aware that Christ was in the Pharisee's house. She "brought an alabaster box of ointment" (Luke 7:37). She humbled herself in the presence of the Sinless One. She, a sinner, "stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment" (7:38). A custom of that time was

the washing of the feet of guests in your home. The miles of road in Palestine were hot and dusty. With only sandals to wear, the feet would obviously become dirty and—er, well—they would not smell great. Hence, this sinner took care of both washing His feet and then anointing those feet with a costly and precious ointment. Indeed, “How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things” (Rom. 10:15)! As Christian soldiers today we must ensure that our feet are “shod with the preparation of the Gospel of peace” (Eph. 6:15).

In Luke 7:39-40, we learn that, when the host saw what the woman did for Christ, “he spake within himself, saying, This man, If he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth Him: for she is a sinner” (7:39). Of course, the parable that Christ immediately relates to this Pharisee enables us to know that Christ knew who had touched Him and what manner of woman she was. More than that, as the Messiah, He knew what this Pharisee was thinking within himself!

Later, in the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:15-21), we receive a glimpse of what the rich fool “thought within himself” (12:17). Then again, in the parable of the unjust steward (16:1-13), we are given knowledge from the mind of the Lord concerning what “the steward said within himself” (16:3). Finally, in the parable of the unjust judge (18:1-8), the Lord lets us look into the thoughts of what that judge “said within himself” (18:4). This kind of insight is only available to the Lord of lords and King of kings. Remember:

For the Word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart (Heb. 4:12).

Recall, “The Lord knoweth the thoughts of the wise” (1 Cor. 3:20).

The Declaration Of The Parable

The Lord will always have “somewhat to say” (Luke 7:40). The Sinless One is now ready to speak to the sinful one. One of the valuable assets of the parable was the ability to cause men to assent to Truth before they realized it was talking about them!

In Luke 7:41-42, Jesus spoke directly to Simon, the Pharisee. The parable is pointed and plain, thirty-one words in English:

There was a certain creditor which had two debtors: the one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will love him most?

Often the best way to teach is by the asking of powerful questions. Simon immediately uttered the Truth, before he realized that Christ had included him within the parable. There were two debtors—i.e., the sinful woman and sinful Simon. Both owed a debt they could not pay. The Lord was willing to pay the debt for them: “Simon answered and said, I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most” (7:43). Christ rewarded him by saying, “Thou hast rightly judged” (7:43).

One debtor owed five hundred pence, or about \$85.00. The other debtor owed fifty pence, or about \$8.50. We are told that the daily wage of a working man in Palestine at that time would be about the equivalent of seventeen cents per day. Either sum would be difficult to repay taking into account rent, food, clothing, and other daily expenses. The Lord’s point is not so much the amount (cf. the ten thousand talents in the parable of the wicked servant in Matthew 18:23-35. That sum would figure in today’s economy at approximately \$10 million); the Lord wants it understood that neither debtor was able to pay what

he/she owed. Simon had not yet figured out that Christ was speaking about him.

The Obligation Of The Parable

Let us note that the words of Luke 7:44-47 are spoken to the host, who was inhospitable. But, as you consider each line of this section, remember Luke 7:44a, "And He turned to the woman, and said unto Simon." The woman hears everything being said by the Savior, and so do the other guests. Simon is the host who showed no hospitality to the One Who brought hope to this world.

Christ contrasts the actions of the sinful woman with those of Simon toward Him. Simon "gavest Me no water for My feet: but she hath washed My feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head" (Luke 7:44). Simon had invited Christ into his home and then had given Him no hospitality.

The story is told of a housewife who had a visit one day from a young man. He offered her some religious tracts to read. She said that she would not be interested. The young man asked before he left, "Does Jesus live in your house?" She was unable to answer. Later that day, she related the episode to her husband. He was perplexed that she had been speechless at the question. He demanded: "Did you tell the young man that we have several Bibles? Didn't you tell him that we go to church services two or three times a month? Did you mention that we are members of a church?" She replied, "He did not ask me any of those things. He asked if Christ lived in our house?"

The Lord then told Simon, "Thou gavest Me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss My feet" (7:45). The kiss on the face was a common form of greeting in the ancient eastern world. Simon had not afforded the Christ that common courtesy. The woman, in humility, had not ceased to kiss His feet.

The Lord next pointed out, “My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed My feet with ointment” (7:46). Anointing the head with olive oil was another common courtesy of that day. Once again, Christ points out that He had been neglected. This refreshment was apparently offered to Simon’s other guests. The woman, who was a sinner, had anointed the Lord’s feet with ointment.

The Salvation Of The Parable

Let me remind you again of Luke 7:44a, “And He turned to the woman, and said unto Simon.” He is speaking to Simon, but He is facing the woman. She is listening to every word. Then the Lord speaks: “Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many” (7:47). Can you not imagine the sinking in her heart at hearing those words? Her sins—so many! But, wait, listen: “Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little” (7:47).

The Truth hit Simon with the force of a ton of bricks: “For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost” (19:10). Christ had also said, “I am not come to the call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Matt. 9:13). He had not even come to call the self-righteous to repentance! The one who cannot admit that he has sinned and is a sinner cannot be saved. Christ came to this earth and died in the stead of those lost in sin; but we must know that such is our condition. We must humble self, like the sinful woman, and admit we are helpless without the hope offered by “the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Christ said, “For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt. 6:14-15).

Simon was not forgiving of others and so obtained no forgiveness for himself. “And he said unto her,” the Lord is now speaking directly to the woman—to a wicked woman—“**thy sins are forgiven**” (Luke 7:48, emp. mine, JW). There is not one word ever uttered by the woman in this narrative from start to finish. She had received much, while Simon had received little. She had been given one of the greatest blessings of all. It is more wonderful than the blessing of life, or anything this world has to offer. She had been granted the pardon for all of her sins. Her service to the Lord had been rewarded by having her sins removed. Christ had the power to pronounce sins forgiven.

“And they that sat at meat with him began to say within themselves, Who is this that forgiveth sins also?” (Luke 7:49). Notice again that expression “within themselves.”

Christ knew their thoughts:

But when Jesus perceived their thoughts (Luke 5:22).

But he knew their thoughts (6:8).

But he, knowing their thoughts (11:17, etc.).

In Matthew 9:1-8, and Mark 2:1-12, and Luke 5:17-26, we have recorded the miraculous healing of a man sick of palsy (an incurable disease until the coming of the Son of God). This man was a sinner (Mark 2:5; Luke 5:20), like the woman of our present study. Notice the narrative:

And when He saw their faith, He said unto him, Man, thy sins are forgiven thee. And the scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, Who is this which speaketh blasphemies? Who can forgive sins, but God alone? (Luke 5:20-21).

They had hit upon the truth of the matter and did not realize it!

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made (John 1:1-3).

We cannot fail to see the similarity of reasoning in the Pharisees of Luke 5 and the group assembled in Luke 7. Christ spoke to those in Luke 5 saying “that ye may know that the Son of Man hath power upon earth to forgive sins, (he said unto the sick of palsy,) I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy couch, and go into thine house” (Luke 5:24). The One Who had earlier stated to this sick one, “Man, thy sins are forgiven thee” (5:20), had shown that such power and privilege belonged to Him as God’s only begotten Son: “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool” (Isa. 1:18).

Later, as our Lord hung suspended between heaven and earth on a Roman cross, He turned to a penitent thief and uttered the promise, “Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). Sometimes people will ask of me what I believe happened to the thief on the cross. It has always been my conviction that the thief was saved. The Lord of heaven and earth promised they would be together that day in a beautiful garden fit for royalty. However, there is no solace here for any individual who wants to be saved without obeying Christ in baptism. The thief lived and died under a dispensation of time that was waning away as the life’s blood ebbed from their bodies (Col. 2:14). Now, all men live under the sure and certain stipulation the Hebrews author described:

Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him (Heb. 5:8-9).

It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning (Lam. 3:22-23).

Christ speaks to the woman for the final time in this narrative: "Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace" (Luke 7:50). Christ lets it be known that her faith had saved her. He does not teach that she was saved by faith alone. No person in the history of the world has been saved by faith standing alone: "Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only" (Jas. 2:24). A faith that will not obey is a faith that will not, shall not, and cannot save a single, solitary soul.

Hebrews 11 shows that faith will always be moved to the action of obedience:

By faith Abel offered unto God (v. 4).

By faith Enoch...pleased God (v. 5).

By faith Noah...prepared an ark (v. 7).

By faith Abraham...obeyed; and he went out (v. 8).

By faith Abraham...offered up Isaac (v. 17).

By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau (v. 20).

By faith Jacob...blessed both the sons of Joseph; and worshipped (v. 21).

By faith Joseph...gave commandment (v. 22).

By faith Moses...refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter...forsook Egypt...kept the Passover (vv. 24, 27-28).

By faith they (the Israelites, JW) passed through the Red Sea (v. 29).

By faith the harlot Rahab...received the spies with peace (v. 31).

And the list goes on. The Hebrews author goes on to write:

Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb. 12:2).

The Application Of The Parable

Jesus Christ forgave the woman and said to her, “go in peace” (Luke 7:50). Pride stood between the Pharisee and true peace. Penitence united the sinful woman with the “peace of God, which passeth all understanding” (Phil. 4:7). Salvation is offered to all: “For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared unto all men” (Tit. 2:11).

Grace is unmerited favor. It is available to all men everywhere. Of course, not all men will avail themselves of the great gift of God’s grace. That does not negate the fact that the gift is freely offered to all: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9).

This parable demonstrates the great generosity of God’s forgiving grace: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). The creditor of the parable is God. The debtor who owed five hundred pence was the sinful woman. The creditor who owed fifty pence was the Pharisee. Neither was able to pay the debt. The debt stands for man’s sin, your sins, my sins, all sin!

Brother W. Gaddys Roy has an excellent breakdown to the application of this parable:

1. Man has sinned (Gen. 3; Rom. 3:23).
2. Man is not able to pay for his sins.

3. Man is still loved of God, and God is willing to forgive though man has transgressed (Ezek. 33:11; 2 Pet. 3:9).
4. God gave His Son for us (John 3:16).
5. Christ gave His life for us (2 Cor. 8:9).
6. Man is forgiven of God but not unconditionally (Heb. 5:9; Rom. 6:17-18).²

Man is saved by God's grace; but that free gift must be coupled with man's obedient faith. As the song states, "Trust and obey, for there is no other way."

The generosity of God's gracious gift is reflected in the story of the schoolteacher in the little one-room schoolhouse in a drab, midwestern town. The teacher purchased some pansies, prepared a flowerbed around the schoolhouse, and tenderly nourished the young plants. He cautioned the children not to play in the flowerbed, not to run through it, and not to pick the flowers. Children will be children, and, time after time, they did run through the midst of the flowers. The teacher made a stern ruling that anyone bothering the flowers in any way would receive seven strokes with his ruler.

All went well until one day one of the older boys approached the teacher, leading his little sister by the hand. In her other hand there was tightly clutched a rapidly wilting bouquet of pansies she had picked for her mother's birthday. "Mary," the teacher asked, "did you pick the pansies?" Many could only nod her head. "And do you know the rules?" Again her little head nodded in deep despair. "Then hold out your hand."

Slowly the little white hand was extended, but before the ruler could be brought down, a larger brown hand covered the little hand, as the big brother asked, "Teacher, is there anything in the rules about whose hand it must be?" No, there was not, so seven times the ruler was brought down sharply across the hand of Mary's big brother, while she could only stand with tears streaming down her little

cheeks. Afterwards, she threw her little arms around her brother's neck and thanked him for taking her punishment. As she explained to her mother later that day what had happened, she pointed in the direction of her big brother and, with a big smile on her face, said, "**he took my place!**"

Do you get it? That is precisely what Christ did for me, for you, for all men! **He took my place!** It was the Son of God Who took our punishment, our place: "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). It was through the cross of Christ that God condemned sin. The paradox is that it was through that same cross that God could save the sinner.

Christ exclaimed, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me" (John 12:32).

One final lesson and the lesson will be yours. Let us learn from the parable the necessity of forgiving one another. What the world needs now, what the church of my Lord needs now, what the family needs now is to learn the art of forgiving one another. There is so little forgiveness in the world. There is not nearly enough forgiveness among brethren in Christ. We must learn to forgive one another.

Christ taught, "Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy" (Matt. 5:7). We all need mercy from God. Without His mercy we are hopeless, hapless, and helpless. As Paul wrote, "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable" (1 Cor. 15:19). God expects us to be merciful and forgiving of others: "And be ye kind one to another, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Eph. 4:32). Again, we learn, "Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye" (Col. 3:13). If we want to be forgiven, then we simply must learn to forgive others.

Christ stated, “But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt. 6:15). Finally, “Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36). If we desire mercy, and all of us need it, we must willingly extend mercy.

If we expect God to forgive us, if we want others to forgive us, then we must be willing to forgive others. Yet, I dare say, most of us know of brethren who have harbored grudges against brothers and sisters in Christ for years and years. Many times brethren go to their graves in that sad condition. Like the song states, “There’s a sad day coming...Are you ready for the judgment day?”

Conclusion

It is our sincere hope that we have handled aright the Word of Truth in this brief study of this powerful and precious parable of our Lord Jesus Christ: “And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified” (Acts 20:32).

Endnotes

1 All Scripture quotations are from the King James Version.

2 W. Gaddys Roy, **Sermon Outlines On the Parables of Jesus** (Anniston, AL: W. Gaddys Roy, 1974), p. 8.

CHAPTER 36

The Parable Of The Pharisee And The Publican

Garland Elkins

Introduction

THE PURPOSE OF THIS truly outstanding parable is set forth in verse nine: “And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others” (Luke 18:9).

The Pharisee’s Prayer

1. The prayer was uttered in secrecy. Doubtless this was an expression of his true feeling. He stood and prayed thus with himself. He might not have prayed this prayer in public. However, in secret, he truly expressed his mind, his thinking.

2. In his prayer he revealed his self-trust. He acknowledged no sin, expressed no desire, and offered no petition to God. He merely informed God of his goodness. He used the personal pronoun “I” five times.

3. He showed disdain and contempt for others. He set others at naught. He classified men, placing himself in one class and others in another class. He thinks of himself as good and others as bad. He compares himself to others and prefers himself. (Isa. 65:2; 2 Cor. 10:12).

Pride Causes Many To Fall

There are many texts of Scripture that point out the danger of pride, arrogance, and self-righteousness. Solomon wrote, "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18). Instead of being puffed up we should "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths" (3:5-6). One gets into trouble when he thinks that he has arrived. Jeremiah wrote, "O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps" (Jer. 10:23). God has shown us what He requires of man. Micah wrote "He hath showed thee, O man what is good: and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (Mic. 6:8). In this verse he specified three things: (1) **To do justly**. In all of our dealings with men, the law of justice should prevail. Jesus said, "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets" (Matt. 7:12); (2) **To love mercy**. Mercy is manifested in three general ways: in forgiveness (Eph. 4:32); in deeds of helpfulness (Luke 10:36-37); in mildness of judgment (Matt. 7:1); (3) **To walk humbly with thy God**. Humility is a very important virtue of the Christian life. Peter wrote:

Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time (1 Pet. 5:5-6).

Both love and humility are basic requirements for living the Christian life. Jesus said:

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Matt. 11:28-30).

Humility, as used by Jesus, is closely related to meekness; it is the proper condition of heart which relies upon God. Self-righteousness and humility are exact opposites.

During the last supper, the apostles demonstrated a lack of humility:

And there was also a strife among them, which of them should be accounted the greatest. And he said unto them, The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors. But ye shall not be so: but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve (Luke 22:24-26).

The desire for greatness is not wrong within itself, but it can easily degenerate into that which is wrong. We should desire to be great in spirituality, not in fame, wealth, or popularity.

Jesus not only taught the proper attitude toward this important subject, but He Himself gave the only perfect meaning. He said to the apostles:

But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many (Matt. 20:26-28).

To illustrate humility Jesus called a little child and set him in the midst of them (Matt. 18:1-3). It appears

from Mark that Jesus first set the child in the midst of them and then took him up in His arms for the purpose of teaching the disciples how submissive and truthful a child is. When people are characterized by true humility, all selfishness is removed, and the spiritual is emphasized. One should possess his possessions (Obad. 17). Jesus said, "In your patience ye shall win your souls" (Luke 21:19).

The Pharisee of Luke 18 was an interesting person. He was one of those self-satisfied souls that trusted in himself that he was righteous and set others at nought and despised them.

The Parable of the Pharisee and Publican (Luke 18:9-14) is truly a classic parable which illustrates the danger of trusting in one's self. There were certain ones who relied on their own righteousness and who, at the same time, looked down on others and utterly despised them.

The contrast between the Pharisee, who "stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are," and the publican, who "would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner," is a vivid contrast between those who trust in self and those who possess true humility. The Pharisee is an example to be avoided by all. He excelled in capitalizing "I," for Jesus concluded the Parable by saying "for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted" (Luke 18:14). The Pharisee admitted no weakness, while the publican was very much aware of his weakness. When one acknowledges his weakness and truly examines himself, that will play a major part in humbling him. To one degree or another, we all have some weaknesses. To be aware of this will aid us in numerous ways to overcome the danger of ego, pride, and self-trust.

We all have our limitations: “For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust” (Psm. 103:14). We are weak in life and in death: “There is no man that hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit; neither hath he power over the day of death; and there is no discharge in war” (Eccl. 8:8). The very strongest of men eventually are humbled in death (Job 14:1-2; Heb. 9:27).

We also have our mental limitations. Although some men possess vast amounts of knowledge, yet everyone is also ignorant in vast areas. Paul wrote, “And if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know” (1 Cor. 8:2). God, unlike man, does indeed know everything: “Great is our Lord, and of great power: his understanding is infinite” (Psm. 147:5).

All of us must deal from time to time with certain moral and spiritual weakness. Even though the Pharisee did not admit that he had any weakness (Luke 18:11), however, he did have them (Rom. 3:23; 1 Kings 8:46). All of us should always keep in mind our Lord’s teaching as recorded in Luke 17:10: “So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.”

Two Men, Two Prayers, Two Answers

Two Men

In the Parable of the Pharisee and Publican, there are some sharp contrasts. This parable is full of biting rebuke for the proud and haughty, while it is equally full of comfort and courage for those who have lost confidence in themselves and who are living under the heavy burden of their own self-contempt. This parable stings the self-righteous, but to those who humbly realize that they have sinned, this parable is a tremendous encouragement.

The first man in the parable was a Pharisee. Brother McGarvey wrote some very interesting things about the Pharisees:

Josephus tells us that these two leading sects of the Jews started about the same time in the days of Jonathan, the high priest, or B.C. 159-144. But the sentiments which at that time divided the people into two rival parties entered the minds and hearts of the Jews immediately after the return from the Babylonian captivity. These returned Jews differed as to the attitude and policy which Israel should manifest toward the neighboring heathen. Some contended for a strict separation between the Jews and all pagan peoples. These eventually formed the Pharisee-party, and the name Pharisee means "the separate." Originally these men were genuine patriots and reformers, but afterwards the majority of them became mere formalists. As theologians the Pharisees represented the orthodox party, and were followed by the vast majority of the people. They believed (1) in the resurrection of the dead; (2) a future state with rewards and punishments; (3) angels and spirits; and (4) a special providence of God carried out by angels and spirits. As a sect they are said to have numbered six thousand at the time of Herod's death. They were the patriotic party, and the zealots were their extreme section. They covered an extremely selfish spirit with a pious formalism, and by parading their virtues they obtained an almost unbounded influence over the people. By exposing their hypocrisy, Jesus sought to destroy their power over the multitude, and incurred that bitter enmity with which they pursued him to his death.¹

At this point I again remind all that there are two men under consideration in the parable of Luke 18:9-14: "Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican" (18:10). The Pharisee has many glaring defects and yet even he has certain good qualities that would put to shame some of his critics:

1. He is religious, though it appears most of his religion is an outward profession, rather than from a sincere pure heart.

2. He is a man of good moral character. He was not an extortioner, unjust, nor an adulterer (Luke 18:11). Some of the Pharisees were accustomed to rob widows' houses, but such a charge could not be made against him. He says that he is not an extortioner, and there is no indication that he is not telling the truth. In addition, he has lived a good moral life. He was not an adulterer.

3. He was generous in the use of his wealth. He gave tithes of all that he possessed. Our Lord once said to the Pharisees:

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!
for ye pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin,
and have omitted the weightier matters of the
law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye
to have done, and not to leave the other undone
(Matt. 23:23).

The second man in the parable is also a Jew but a publican, a tax collector by position. Many of his fellow Jews and especially the Pharisees would have absolutely no good word to have spoken for him. They would have looked upon him as a traitor to his nation and to his God. It would not be difficult to imagine the anger on the part of some who heard this parable, as Jesus contrasts him, hated outcast that he was, at the very bottom of the social ladder, with a Pharisee, who was considered to be at the very top, and give His preference to the publican.

Two Prayers

First we take a look at the prayer of the Pharisee:

The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other

men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess (Luke 18:11-12).

What does his prayer tell us about him? The answer is he has a very favorable eye upon himself, a very unfavorable eye on his fellow men, and no eye at all on the Lord. Let us examine these thoughts in some detail.

1. He has a very favorable eye upon himself. He has an attitude of contempt toward others. He places himself in one class, and others in another class. He thinks of himself as good and others as bad. Not only does he compare himself to others but he also prefers himself to them. Paul wrote:

For we are not bold to number or compare ourselves with certain of them that commend themselves: but they themselves, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves with themselves, are without understanding (2 Cor. 10:12).

2. He has a very unfavorable eye toward others. Since he does not consider that he has any faults, and finding in his estimation nothing wrong with himself, he therefore finds nothing good to say about his brother. How did this Pharisee divide others? He divides them roughly into three groups: "extortioners, unjust, adulterers." Then he sees a fellow that is beating his breast and, while he smites his breast, begs for mercy. He is especially thankful that he is not like him. How blind he was! All that he could see was that the man was a publican. He either overlooked or else did not care that he was a penitent publican!

Further, there does not appear to be any real, deep-seated sympathy for the poor publican: he should have realized that the failure of his brother did not add to his success. He appeared to take satisfaction in the thought of his own goodness and in the thought of the badness of his fellow.

3. He really did not have his eye upon God at all. Though he began his prayer with the word “God,” it is obvious that God was not really in his prayer. One of the reasons that we can be sure that he did not have awareness of God is that he had no awareness of sin, for, when one is aware of the glory of God, he is aware of sin. When the Lord appeared to Moses out of the burning bush, the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man are emphasized: “And he said, Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground” (Exod. 3:5).

Isaiah, wrote, “In the year that king Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple” (Isa. 6:1). The awareness of the holiness of God caused Isaiah to remember his sins. He wrote, “Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, Jehovah of hosts” (6:5). When Simon Peter was in the presence of Jesus and saw what he had done, it is said, “But Simon Peter, when he saw it, fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Luke 5:8). Even on the cross, one of the malefactors disrespected and ridiculed our Lord:

And one of the malefactors that were hanged railed on him, saying, Art not thou the Christ? save thyself and us. But the other answered, and rebuking him said, Dost thou not even fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss (23:39-41).

Now let us look briefly at the beautiful, sincere prayer of the publican. He considers his needs to be more desperate than those of others. He does not look about him for one more guilty than himself behind whom to hide.

He might have said, "I am indeed a sinner, but so are many others." However, he did not do that. His was a true confession of sins. He knows that not only has he done wrong, but he is wrong. He does not blame others; he does not offer excuse for his sins. After David's sin with Bathsheba, God sent Nathan the prophet to David. Nathan told David the parable of the ewe lamb and this caused David to confess his sins: "And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Sam. 12:13).

Likewise the publican confessed his sins and begged God for mercy. How grateful all children of God should be that the Lord is willing to extend His mercy to us! He said, "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Isa. 1:18).

Two Answers

Now that the service is over and the worshipers are on their way home, what have the prayers of the pharisee and the publican accomplished?

The Pharisee has received nothing. In fact he did not ask anything of God. He had such self-trust that he did not even ask God for anything, but rather he paraded before God his assets and compared himself with others. He trusted in himself that he was righteous. I emphasize again that he acknowledged no sin, he expressed no desire, and, in fact, he offered no petition. His object appeared to inform God of his goodness. He showed contempt for all others and, in particular, for the publican. The Pharisee was so full of himself that he had no room for the Lord.

Not only did he not go away better, but worse. His self-satisfaction caused arrested growth. The person who does not see the need, nor has the desire, to do and be better will not improve.

If the Pharisee did not profit from his time spent in prayer to God, the opposite was true for the publican. He came to the Lord in deep penitence, and he left pardoned and cleansed. How encouraging are the words of Hebrews 8:12 to a penitent child of God: "For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more."

The publican was reverent: he stood afar off. He possessed a sense of unworthiness. This is seen in his downward look, the smiting of his breast, and in the fact that he called himself "a sinner." He felt helpless. He begged for God's mercy; he knew that God did not owe him anything. The publican went down to his house forgiven.

Jesus said about him, "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted" (Luke 18:14).

Endnote

1 J. W. McGarvey & Phillip Y. Pendleton, **The Fourfold Gospel**, pp. 71-72.