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The Parables of Jesus



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Introduction

The parables of Jesus are among the most beloved of all stories in the Bible, or ever told. Unique in approach, these simple and colorful stories were effective, because they played to the everyday experiences of people, with poignant endings that brought the message home powerfully.

Jesus' parables were often surprising and paradoxical. Someone once said that listening to Jesus tell a parable must have been a little like watching someone throw a ball into the air. Instead of reaching its apex and returning directly to earth, this particular ball starts back down and then veers off at a right angle. We watch astonished, and search for answers.

Today, a detailed study of the parables can benefit us as well, as we search for our own answers.

It is my intention to organize the material into a traditional 13 week format. However, there is much more than can be covered in this time period. There are over 40 parables and parabolic sayings covered in this outline, and that is not exhaustive. I encourage students of the Gospel to study the parables in depth on their own time. This is simply a study tool – let God's word be your guide.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Brother Paul Cantrell for suggesting the approach for categorizing the parables, and for encouraging me to compile this study guide.

Many thoughts were gleaned from "The Parables – Understanding the Stories Jesus Told" by Simon J. Kistemaker. As much of the material is from this source, I have not made specific references. Please consider this book as "referenced" for much of this study. As with any source other than the Bible, I urge caution, as I disagree with the author on some points. Other sources were used as well, sometimes verbatim – this work is as much a compilation of material from several sources, for the purpose of my own studies and teaching – as such, I do not consider this an original work.

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1) Introduction to the Parables

In his parables, Jesus drew interesting verbal word pictures of the world around his listeners. These colorful stories, taken from everyday life, were used to teach simple yet powerful lessons. In his parables, the emphasis is usually placed at the end of the story – making a strong conclusion that led the listener to accept the message. The messages were so plain, and so simple, that only the most hardened could refuse or reject the teaching.

In The Parables of the Kingdom C. H. Dodd wrote that a parable "leaves the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought." Parables often have more in common with probing, uncompromising, puzzling questions than they do with answers.

There is some disagreement on the exact number of stories to be characterized as parables. Of the four canonical gospels the parables are almost all in the three synoptic gospels. According to one count,

- The Gospel of Luke contains both the largest total number of parables (24) and the largest number of unique parables found nowhere else (10);
- The Gospel of Matthew contains 23 parables of which six are unique;
- The Gospel of Mark contains eight parables of which only one (the Parable of the Growing Seed, Mark 4:26-29) is unique.

John does not contain any parables; rather it contains metaphoric stories or allegories, such as The Shepherd (John 10:1-21) and The Vine (John 15:1-17) which some scholars argue is a parable, to much disagreement.

Although Jesus was not the first teacher to use parables, the number of parables and the impact of his parabolic teachings was without precedent. A famous and quite ancient Old Testament example is the parable of the ewe lamb which the prophet Nathan addressed to David. After the king had arranged the death of Bathsheba's husband on the battlefield so that he might himself marry Bathsheba, Nathan told him a story about a man who killed another man's ewe in (2 Sam 12:1-4) When David condemned the man as deserving to die, Nathan revealed that the story was a parable, saying, "You are the man" (v.7).

Types of Parables

- 1) True Parables – Stories based on true, visible scenes and events. For example, seeds growing, yeast at work, losing a coin... "Self evident truths".
- 2) Story Parables – Do not rely on obvious "truths" but instead are based upon "experiences". For example, the Parable of the tares, the rich man and Lazarus, etc.
- 3) Illustrations – Exhibit behaviors to be copied or avoided. For example, the Rich Fool, the Good Samaritan.
- 4) Parabolic Sayings – Short statements, such as; Jesus teachings on Salt and Light, "Physician heal thyself", "No one sews a new patch on an old garment", "No one puts new wine in an old wineskin", "A pupil is not above his teacher" and "Can a blind man lead a blind man?" Many of these can be found in Luke chapters 4-7.

Many parables show traits of two of the above characteristics – not all can be neatly boxed into one category.

According to Wikipedia.com, “A parable is a brief, succinct story, in prose or verse that illustrates a moral or religious lesson. It differs from a fable in that fables use animals, plants, inanimate objects, and forces of nature as characters, while parables generally feature human characters... A parable is one of the simplest of narratives. It sketches a setting, describes an action, and shows the results. It often involves a character facing a moral dilemma, or making a questionable decision and then suffering the consequences. As with a fable, a parable generally relates a single, simple, consistent action, without extraneous detail or distracting circumstances.”

The Composition of the Parables

- Most parables should be interpreted as teaching a single, simple lesson. Many scholars make the mistake of trying to “read too much” into the parables. This usually leads to “stretching” the teaching such that it conveys more than what Jesus intended. This type of interpretation reached it’s apex in the Middle Ages. But today most modern scholars agree that a master teacher such as Jesus knows that a single point, taught clearly, is better than many points forgotten.
- There are some parables, however, that teach multiple lessons by design – such as the parable of the sower, which teaches about four different ways that the Word of God is received.
- Jesus often uses the literary device of Triads – three primary characters or main illustrative keys. For example:
 - The Friend at Midnight – The traveler, the friend, the neighbor
 - The Prodigal Son – The father, the son, the brother
 - The Parable of the Virgins – The bridegroom, the wise virgins, the foolish virgins
- In Jesus parables, the end is nearly always more important than the beginning. Jesus uses “end stress” to make a clear point. This is a deliberate design on his part. It leaves the user with an impact requiring time to be absorbed and assimilated.
 - The good Samaritan is introduced last, not first
 - The man with only one talent is discussed later than the other two
- Many times parables are used to teach new lessons.

The Purpose of the Parables

The parables show that Jesus was acquainted with human life in multiple ways and means. He was familiar with and comfortable describing people of all walks of life, from the uneducated poor to religious scholars and the rich.

- Some spoke of the common people – farmers, fishermen, builders
- Other spoke of managers of estates, finance ministers and judges
- Jesus also spoke of Pharisees and tax collectors and the rich

Jesus spoke in the language of the people – he taught at their level. Listeners of any background or educational level could understand the messages of the parables. Jesus taught this way to convey the message of salvation and the kingdom in a clear and simple manner.

Interpretation of the Parables

Mark 4:11-12 (NIV) *He told them, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, “they may be ever seeing but*

never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!

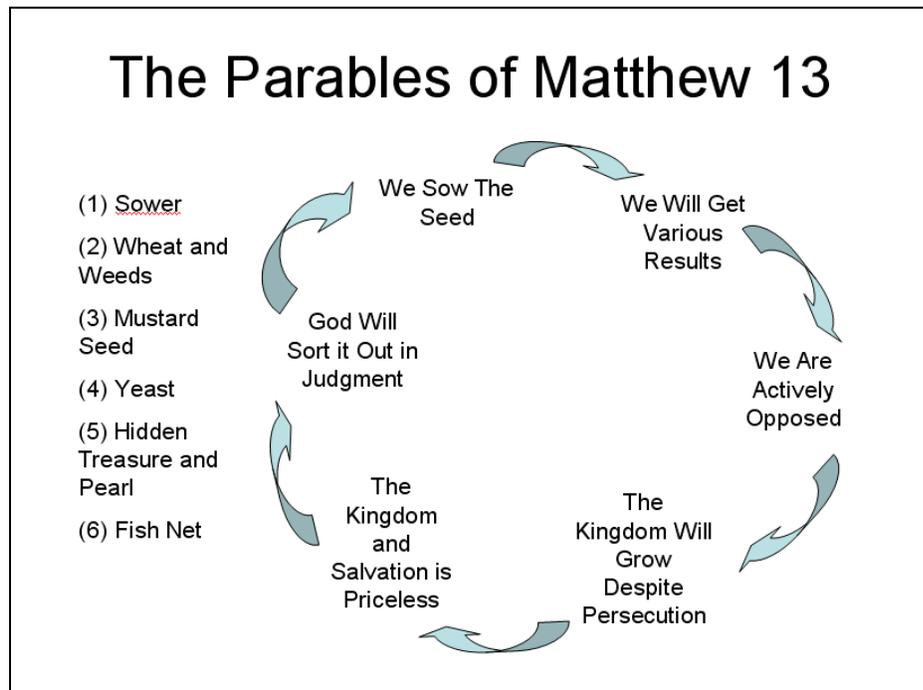
Many have read this passage and assumed that the parables are a sort of riddle, understood only by those who were “on the inside” or who had been given other teaching as a precursor. They assume that Jesus was hiding his message, not wanting it to be fully revealed at the time it was taught.

But we must interpret this passage in the context in which it is placed.

- In Mark 3 Jesus encounters blatant unbelief and direct opposition. He is even accused of being possessed by Beelzebub (see Mark 3:22)
- In Mark 3:6 there are those plotting how they might kill Jesus
- At the end of Mark 3, Jesus presents his “family” – those who believe.
- Thus, it is a matter of faith and unbelief. Those who put their faith in Jesus heard the parables and accepted the messages. But others were so hardened that even these simple teachings were rejected and misunderstood.

There are basic rules of interpretation that should be applied to the parables:

- Study the historical setting, the religious groups and teachings of the time, the social and political environment, and even geography of the Bible lands, for a fuller understanding
- Pay close attention to the introductions and the conclusions
- Check all interpretations against the other teachings of Jesus and the scriptures – for unity and harmony.
- Translate the meaning to be applied to your life and time today – how can you learn from and apply the teachings in your own life?



Do your best to associate the parables of Matthew 13 with the diagram shown here.

Do you believe the parables were presented in their specific order for a purpose?

Points to Ponder

Examine Luke chapters 4-7. How many “parabolic sayings” can you find?

How many other Old Testament parables can you think of?

2 Sam 14:1-23; _____

1 Kings 20:35-43; _____

Isa 5:1-7; _____

Isa 28:21-29; _____

Ezek 17:1-24; _____

Ezek 19:1-14; _____

Ezek 20:45-49; _____

Ezek 24:1-14 _____

What is your favorite parable, and why?

What differences do you see between the Old Testament parables and those of Jesus?

2) The Great Value of the Kingdom

Parable of the Hidden Treasure (Matt 13:44)

Parable of the Pearl of Great Price (Matt 13:45-46)

Matthew chapter 13 contains no less than seven parables. The order in which these are told appears to be deliberate:

1. Parable of the Sower – Describes the growth of the kingdom and how men will react to it
2. Parable of the Weeds – Warning of difficulties to be faced in growing the Kingdom
3. Parable of the Mustard Seed – Great growth of the Kingdom
4. Parable of the Yeast – Great growth of the Kingdom
5. Parable of the Hidden Treasure – Great value of the Kingdom
6. Parable of the Pearl – Great value of the Kingdom
7. Parable of the Net – Reward to those in the Kingdom, and punishment to those who oppose it

These are short parables – only two sentences

- The introduction is the familiar, “The kingdom of heaven is like...”
- The main point of the parables is found in the second sentence.

The parables of the hidden treasure and of the pearl are found only in Matthew. They form a tightly-knit pair. They should be examined and discussed together.

The concept of hidden or buried treasure is a common theme throughout history.

- A buried or hidden treasure is an important part of the popular beliefs surrounding pirates. According to popular conception, pirates often buried their stolen fortunes in remote places, intending to return for them later.
- Popular movies such as the series based on Indiana Jones, the “National Treasure” movies, and the Pirates of the Caribbean series were built on these ideas.
- The “Mindenhall Treasure” is one of the most important collections of silver tableware of the late Roman Empire. The silver which was found in Mildenhall, Suffolk in 1942 when a farmer who was making his fields ready for planting struck it with his plow.
- In Biblical times, the banking system was not well established, and houses were easily broken into – so “burying one’s treasure” in their yard or a field may have been a common occurrence among everyday people.
- But if the owner died, the treasure would remain hidden, unless found by someone else.

Imagine a hired hand, plowing a field behind an ox or a mule. The blade hits something hard. Thinking it is a rock, the man starts to dig it up to cast it to the side. But, to his surprise, he finds a great treasure.

- The man could not just take the treasure – as people would ask him where he came upon such good fortune. If he did not own the field, it would be obvious that it belonged to the land owner.
- We lack the full details of laws of ownership in such cases, in Jesus day. Therefore, we are not supposed to debate the morality of buying the field when one knows of the treasure hidden in it. Jesus assumes this is moral and does not call it into question.

So the man covers the treasure up, and goes home immediately.

- He sold all that he had and bought the field
- He knew that the price he would get for the treasure greatly outweighed the value of his home – he would be greatly rewarded for the investment
- Imagine the amazement of those who ridiculed him, when they discovered his wisdom after he bought the field.

The parable of the pearl is very similar:

- In this case, a merchant finds a great pearl
- The pearl is not hidden, but plain to see
- He also must leverage all he has to buy the pearl
- He knows the price for the pearl is a bargain

In Old Testament times, pearls were not widely known or discussed. But by the first century pearls had become a status symbol among wealthy people.

- “Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces.” Matt 7:6
- “I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes” – I Tim 2:9
- “The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their cargoes any more— cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls...” Rev 18:11-12

In New Testament times, pearl traders would travel far to buy and sell pearls. Inferior ones came from the Red Sea; better pearls were usually from the Persian Gulf or even India. The pearl trader is not out looking for this great or perfect pearl; he is going about his normal daily business of buying and trading normal pearls. In fact, we get the impression he is surprised to find such a perfect specimen.

Parallels

- In both parables, the treasure is found by accident
- The men must make a “now or never” decision
- Both must give up all they have to obtain the treasure

The intent of these parables is to convey that some rewards are great enough to be worth great sacrifices: the men may have to sell all that they had, but when they buy the field or the pearl, they gain the treasure, which is worth more than all that he sold.

Jesus told this parable to express the idea that even if living according to God's commandments was a difficult thing to do and demanded great sacrifices; they would result in the reward of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Most scholars identify the treasure and the pearl with Christ. We then are like the two men, who “find Christ” and realize that living in Him is worth any sacrifice we can make. Our heavenly reward is much greater than the sum of all we have on this earth. When we find Christ, we are filled with joy, and nothing can stop us from giving up our lifestyles, and in some cases even our careers or families to claim our reward.

The response to Jesus is total surrender. Our salvation is not purchased – it is a gift. Yet Jesus demands the believer's heart.

Points to Ponder

An alternate interpretation given by some is that Jesus is the man who buys the field, paying for it with His blood to attain the hidden treasure, i.e. the Church. Some have found it difficult to place ourselves in the role as the 'man' in this parable since several scripture verses teach that the kingdom of heaven cannot be purchased. It is Jesus who, according to the scriptures, purchases His church. In supporting of this interpretation, they cite other scriptures; 1 Corinthians 6:20 says "you were bought with a price..." 1 Cor 7:23 says "you were bought with a price..." (2 Peter 2:1, 1 Peter 1:18) What do you think?

There is a difference between a purchase and a sacrifice. Some have said that these two men did not make a sacrifice, even though they sold all they had. A sacrifice is giving which expects no reward. A purchase is giving in return for something else. What do you think? Do you ever consider Christianity a sacrifice?

The two men did not speculate – they were not making a risky purchase. They knew, and had full assurance, of the value of their treasures. To bypass them would be foolish. Is there any speculation in our part in giving up our worldly lives to follow Christ?

If Jesus demands our hearts – what does that then imply?

"It's no good, it's no good!" says the buyer; then off he goes and boasts about his purchase."
Prov 20:14

Parable of the Great Feast (Luke 14:15-24)

Jesus is having dinner in the home of a prominent Pharisee. After the worship on the Sabbath, it was common for the speakers and important guests to be invited to eat in the home of a prominent synagogue member.

- All eyes are on Jesus, "everyone was carefully watching" him to see how he would act and what he would do. It appears Jesus was "set up" – a sick man with dropsy (swelling of the legs and extremities) was placed in front of him.
- It is contrary to all laws of hospitality to seek advantage against one that you invited to be your guest. Jesus knew the situation, yet he went anyway, as he was not intimidated – they were no match for Jesus, "The Master".
- First he asks the Pharisees and teachers of the law, "Is it right to heal on the Sabbath?" They do not answer him. Why not?
 - If they say "yes" they condone what he is about to do – which they condemn.
 - If they say "no" then they will lose favor with the people, and risk Jesus trapping them in their false logic.
 - It is easier to sit back and condemn, than to do good.
- He then heals the man.
- Jesus defends his healing work by saying, "If your son or ox falls into a well, wouldn't you pull him out right away, even on the Sabbath?"
 - There was nothing they could say.

The atmosphere in the house is now tense. Not only were the guests watching how Jesus would handle the setup, many were likely upset over the actions of the other guests, and even the host. In this situation, with all watching him closely, Jesus tells a parable.

- This parable was based upon the behavior of some of the guests, which Jesus had observed as he sat for the meal.
- Many of the guests had tried to take the best seats.
- This must have caused difficulties for the host.
- Pride was blocking out humility. A spirit of selfishness and conceit was evident to all those at the meal.

In the parable, Jesus discusses proper behavior at a wedding feast.

- When you are invited to a wedding feast, don't sit in the best place. Someone more important may have been invited.
- Then the one who invited you will come and say, "Give your place to this other guest!"
 - You will be embarrassed and will have to sit in the worst place.
- When you are invited to be a guest, go and sit in the worst place.
 - Then the one who invited you may come and say, "My friend, take a better seat!"
 - You will then be honored in front of all the other guests.

Social Etiquette of the Day

- Tables at a wedding were arranged in a horseshoe shape, with activities in the center
- The main guest sat at the center of the middle table, 3 people per table.
- The second most important guest was on his left. (Today we associate the right side or "hand" as most important. But in battle, your left side is weakest – and that is where you want your best fighting man...)
- The third most important was on his right.
- The table to the left received the next three most important guests, with the center seat again being the most important.
- Then the table to the right was seated, and the pattern repeated.
- Normally the host would seat the guests – otherwise chaos could erupt.

Lessons of the Parable

- If you put yourself above others, you will be put down.
- If you humble yourself, you will be honored. This is the best approach.

We are not told what Jesus did as he entered the house of the Pharisee. But we can assume he would have acted as he taught others to do here. He surely stayed back until the host seated him at the main table. Perhaps prominent Pharisees had even mocked him for not rushing to the important seats.

The Pharisees were no doubt familiar with the proverb of Solomon, in Prov 25:6-7. Yet they ignored this principle.

This parable is found only in Luke – but there are many examples of this teaching and example in the Bible. *What ones can you think of?*

- Matt 18:4 – We are to be as children
- Matt 23:11-12 – We are to humble ourselves
- John 13:4-17 – Jesus washes the feet of his disciples
- Rom 12:15 – Ask God to bless those who mistreat you

- Phil 2:3-4 – Consider others more important than yourselves
- I Peter 5:6 – Be humble in the presence of God
- Lev 19:18, Lev 19:34 – O.T. Basis for the “Golden Rule”
- Matt 7:12, Luke 6:31 – “Golden Rule”

Jesus then instructs his host on who he should invite to a banquet meal:

- Not friends, family, relatives or neighbors
- Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind

The reason? They cannot pay you back – but God will bless and reward you when his people rise from death. See Matt 25:40

We are not to give on a reciprocal basis, but humbly.

- Matt 5:43-48 (love your enemies)
- Matt 6:1-2 (give secretly)
- James 4:6 (God opposes the proud)
- Phil 2:8 (Jesus humbled himself)

Points to Ponder

What do the actions of the guests, in how they attempted to be seated for the meal, tell you about them?

The prideful behavior of the Pharisees is discussed in many places, such as in Matt 23:5-7. Are there any behaviors like this that you see in the church today?

Is it appropriate in a religious service to use titles such as “Doctor” or “Congressman” when introducing or addressing a member of the church?

What titles and actions can be used to unscripturally elevate some men over others? (Matt 23:9)

Jesus did not sit back – he pointed out bad behavior when he saw it. Read Psalms 39:1-2. When should we speak up, and when should we be silent?

Read Prov. 22:16. Why do so many people live opposite to this entreaty?

Parable of the Wedding Feast (Matt 22:1-14)

This is two parables in one – Jesus tells “a story within a story” – both are related. By doing this he makes two distinct yet related points.

At the time Jesus was teaching this parable, he had already incurred the wrath of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. He was now in the last week of his life on earth.

- In Matt chapter 21, Jesus drove the money changers from the temple.
- He also openly taught that prostitutes and tax collectors, considered the lowest of all people by the Jews, would enter the kingdom of heaven before the Pharisees.
- Jesus did not shirk away from danger – he knew the leaders were openly looking for a way to have him arrested.

In this heated environment, Jesus taught the parable of the wedding feast. This parable was clearly directed against his opponents.

- A king gives a wedding banquet for his son
- “All things are ready. Come to the feast.”
- Servants are sent to tell the previously invited guests to come. But they refuse
 - Some leave for their farms
 - Others to their places of business
 - Some even grab the servants and kill them!

A royal invitation is akin to a royal command. Invitations from the king were not turned down lightly. Not only were the invitations rejected, but bitterness and a complete lack of respect to the king and his servants was shown. High ranking people had snubbed the king. They acted in open defiance. (Think of the “white elephant” gift...)

- The king is furious. He sends his army to kill the murderers and burn down their city. He tells his servants to invite people from the street corners
 - They invite all they can meet and find, good and bad alike.
 - The banquet room is filled.

“Jesus answered” – not a specific question, but the thoughts and intentions of their hearts. Jesus knows what we think.

What is the meaning of this parable?

1. First the King (God) invites only his “invited guests”. The Jews liked to boast of their birthright as the chosen people of God. They are now told that through their actions of rejecting God and his son, that birthright would be rejected.
2. When the invited guests (the Jews) reject the invitation, the King invites everyone else, good and bad.

When the Jews rejected Jesus, this path into the kingdom was opened to the Gentile world. (Acts 10:44-48; Acts 15:7-9; Rom 11:30)

- The gospel is open to all – the rich and poor, all nations, all races, men and women. God is no respecter of persons. (1 Cor 12:13)

In a banquet, normally peace and harmony prevail. All enjoy the food and fellowship that is offered. When a host offers food and drink, this expresses a bond of peace and is an attempt toward unity of the host and his guests. To reject the invitation in an openly defiant way is a bitter snub.

In this culture, guests were expected to accept such invitations as a matter of duty.

- It is also expected that they will come with gifts.
- Because the guests cannot reciprocate by inviting the king to their residence, the gifts must be of great value.
- Refusal conveys the message that the king’s son is not worthy of a gift or respect, that the guests do not approve of the marriage, and that they no longer render allegiance to the king.

The Servants are Rejected and Killed

- Israel treated the prophets shamefully and rejected them (Matt 23:29-35)

- They rejected God's call to repentance
- Now they rejected the Son of God

The King Reacts

- The open defiance must be countered with a full show of authority
- He rules and demands obedience
- Those who reject him are punished severely (Deut 4:24)
- In inviting the good and bad to the banquet, the king is the picture of love and benevolence – this portrays the mercy God extends to all sinners

The Wedding Garment

- Jesus continues his story – this is the second part
- One of the guests is not wearing the right kind of clothes – the wedding garment
- The man has no excuse for his behavior
- The king has him bound and thrown outside into torment
- Many are called, but few are chosen

It was common in those times for wedding garments to be provided. This way, everyone puts aside their social and economic status to be equals in the banquet. The clothes would typically be white, signifying joy, happiness and purity.

Not wearing the supplied garment would be a deliberate insult. Such a one is obstinate and full of contempt, demanding that others pay homage to their status and considering themselves above others.

The king wants all to accept what he offers, on his terms. The book of Revelation speaks of the righteous wearing white clothes or fine linen that is bright and clean. God gives us a garment of righteousness, signifying that we have been cleansed and made whole. God wants all sinners to come to him and put on the white clothing of repentance and forgiveness.

The guest who refused to wear the wedding clothing represents the self-righteous sinner. He wants to make known he does not believe he needs the sacrificial death and atoning blood of Christ to enter the kingdom. He rejects the words of Jesus in John 14:6, "No-one comes to the Father except through me."

Points to Ponder

The invitation is universal – yet only those who accept it are given eternal life (Acts 13:48)

God takes no pleasure in the destruction of the wicked. (Ezek 18:23; 33:11) God does not want anyone to perish (2 Peter 3:9). Then why is it important for God to destroy those who do not accept his call?

"Many are called, but few are chosen". Why do so many people reject the call of God?

Many scholars believe that when destruction of the wicked men who rejected the king's invitation points to the pending destruction of Jerusalem. What do you think?

3) The Cost of Citizenship of the Kingdom (1)

Parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:1-7; Matt 18:12-14)

This is the first of three parables in this chapter (Luke 15). We present them all together now, as they are tied together with a common theme; that being that God has no pleasure in the loss of sinners, but he has great joy in their repentance and obedience.

The chapter opens with two groups listening to Jesus:

1. Tax collectors and sinners
2. Pharisees and teachers of the law

As usual, the Pharisees start mumbling. Rather than rejecting the lower classes, like they do, Jesus accepts them, and even eats with them. This was offensive to the Pharisees.

Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep:

- He calls them to imagine having 100 sheep
- One gets lost. The shepherd leaves the 99 sheep to look for the lost one.
- When the lost sheep is found, the shepherd celebrates with his friends and neighbors

This is a beloved parable. Many songs have been written about it; many paintings have depicted this scene. This is a favorite of children. Again, Jesus uses common, everyday realities (a lost sheep) to express a divine truth. This story would be especially meaningful in the agricultural society of the time.

Sheep are social animals. They live together as a flock. When a sheep gets lost, it becomes very bewildered. Often they will lie down and refuse to move, frozen in fear.

The man who owned 100 sheep was a man of considerable means. Yet, the same man was willing to carry a 70 lb. sheep back to the flock.

When the shepherd finds the sheep, he is very joyful. This could be the end of the story, yet Jesus continues it. The man goes to his friends and neighbors. Happiness shared is genuine happiness. The shepherd goes from worry and tension to joy. Now he is compelled to share his joy.

Application

In the beginning of Matthew 18, Jesus is asked, "Who will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

- Jesus calls a child over
- He says that if we do not change and become like the child, we will not get into the kingdom of heaven
- He then says if you are humble, like the child, you are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven
- He then follows with a warning not to lead such a humble follower into sin, along with a discourse on the measures to which we should go to resist sin

The “little children” mentioned by Jesus symbolically become his followers. Our faith is characterized by child-like simplicity. In Luke, we see that Jesus is surrounded by such spiritual infants, the tax collectors and sinners. It is in this context that he tells the parable.

Jesus is comparing the tax collectors and prostitutes to the lost sheep.

- Tax collectors were Jewish people in the employ of the Roman government. They were considered traitors by most Jews.
- Great social barriers had been erected between the spiritual “elite” (Pharisees and teachers of the law) and those who most needed teaching about God. The teachers had separated themselves from those needing taught the most.
- Jesus bridged this gap.
- God rejoices over every sinner, every moral outcast, who becomes a Christian.

Points to Ponder

What barriers do we erect between ourselves and those who need God?

Do we truly welcome the moral outcasts and the poor? (Mark 10:21; Gal 2:10; James 2:2-5)

Do we sometimes elevate our teachers and leaders in such a way that we end up erecting barriers between them and other people? What are ways in which this is done?

Whose responsibility is it to seek out and find the lost sheep?

What could you do to help the church identify and rescue “the lost sheep” of your congregation?

Parable of the Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10)

Luke often presents his material in pairs. When he mentions a man, he often mentions a woman. For example:

- Zacharias and Elizabeth
- Joseph and Mary
- Simeon and Anna
- The widow of Zaraphath and Naaman the Syrian
- The man with the mustard seed and the woman mixing yeast
- The parable of the shepherd with the lost sheep and the woman losing a coin

The Lost Sheep and Lost Coin parables form a pair, essentially teaching the same message.

This story sparks with beauty due to its brevity. It reveals all the emotions of anxiety, worry, elation and joy in only a few sentences. Yet it is complete.

Jesus Portrays A Woman Who Has 10 Coins.

- Some scholars believe that these coins were part of her dowry. A dowry is the money, goods, or estate that a woman brings to her soon to be husband in marriage. This is different from a bride price, which is paid to the bride's parents. The same culture may simultaneously practice both dowry and bride price.

- They were often worn as ornamental decorations on her headdress. Today, we can equate the monetary and sentimental value to an engagement ring.
- One of the coins falls off and is lost. The woman begins the search in her home.
- This custom seems strange to us. Yet even today, the “engagement ring” is a by-product of these ancient customs.

Sweeping the House

- Houses of the common people were often constructed without windows. There may be a single opening near the ceiling for ventilation and some light.
- So even in the middle of the day it was dark in the house. Hence, the woman lights a candle for the search.
- The floor would often be constructed of basalt stone, which could easily hide a coin in the cracks.
- The woman would search and sweep frantically until she caught a gleam of reflected light or heard the tinkle of the coin on the hard floor.

Finding the Coin

- The woman starts with anxiety and worry over the lost coin.
- All other worries and concerns are put aside due to the pressing need to find the lost coin.
- This gives way to joy and jubilation when the lost coin is found.
- Like the shepherd who finds the lost sheep, she calls her friends and neighbors together to rejoice.
- Jesus concludes by stating, “In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”



MILLAIS. — THE LOST PIECE OF SILVER.

Clara Erskine Clement, public domain (copyright expired)

As the household of the woman rejoices when the lost coin is found, so heaven rejoices when a lost sinner repents and comes back to God.

The coin, though lost, still belonged to the woman. A sinner, when lost, still belongs to God. God directs his love toward the lost and erring. “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”. (Rom 5:8)

Jesus showed God’s love to the sinners and moral outcasts of the day. He taught them, he entered their homes, he ate with them. Because of this, he was given the name “friend of sinners” (Matt 11:19)

The parables of the lost sheep and lost coin both have an evangelistic thrust. The church is to extent its love toward the lost of the world – whether never saved, or saved then fallen away. Christ died for the ungodly (Rom 5:6). We should mirror this in our evangelistic zeal.

Points to Ponder

If angels rejoice when a sinner repents... How should we react? What should we do when we know of someone who requires repentance?

With this parable Jesus challenged the Scribes and Pharisees to see the publicans and sinners as God sees them-- in a different light, as persons of worth. Why did this not change their attitudes?

It has been said that these two parables say that what governs God's behavior to us is not our sins, or our problems, but it is his need to find us. These parables go by the need of the finder to find, not about the need of the lost to be found. Do you believe God "needs" for us to be saved?

Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)

Again, we must first start our examination of this parable by looking at the context. Jesus, eating with publicans and tax collectors, is under accusation by the self-righteous Pharisees. These teachers of the Law, although they did try to gain converts, were selective in who they were willing to accept as "fellow heirs" in God's kingdom. To them, the tax collectors and prostitutes had cut themselves off from the religious community and were spiritually dead. And when they did make a convert, they were not interested in that person's relationship with God, but only by their outward appearance and traditions (Matt 23:15).

Through this parable, Jesus reflected the composition of the audience. Each person who listens to this parable has to look into a mirror and ask, "Which of these characters am I?" The prodigal son represented the social outcasts, in need of God. The oldest son represents the self-righteous. And the Father represents God.

It is ironic that over and over again, Israel is represented as the wayward son. And time and time again God accepts them back. (Jer 31:18-19) The Jewish religious leaders were unwilling to grant to common people the same forgiveness and acceptance that God had granted to Israel repeatedly in the past.

The Younger Son

The younger son is represented as restless and wanting to get away from parental supervision. He asks for his share of the inheritance, intending to leave the family business.

- This was a serious breach of family tradition
- The younger son is, in effect, stating that he no longer wants to work with his father, that he hates the daily routine of work
- He wants to take his money and do as he sees fit
- This request is a mark of disrespect to the father

The Price of a Share

- If a father has two sons, the oldest receives 2/3 and the youngest 1/3 at the time of the father's death (Deut 21:17). His "early share" of the inheritance was likely less than the 1/3 amount, as he was not fulfilling his obligations to work for this share.
- By doing this, the son would be "cut off" from his family as an outcast.
- He forfeited any additional claim to the estate, no matter how prosperous the estate might become in the future.
- He lost his name, standing and prestige in the community
- He would be cut off and "thought of as dead" by his family

Mistakes of the Son

- Youthful inexperience and idealism
- Lack of discretion
- Readily available cash
- False friends
- Carefree, spendthrift manner

After Some Time, The Son Finds Himself In A Bad Position:

- The money is gone
- His friends are gone
- A severe famine is in place
- He is hungry and destitute
- He is working for a gentile feeding his pigs
 - Pigs are unclean animals to the Jews
 - By working for a Gentile, he could not observe the Sabbath, and is thus cut off from his religion

It Would Be Difficult For Him To Return Home:

- The servants and hired men would mock him
- His father might reject him, after seeing him barefoot and in rags.
- His brother would not take this kindly
- The community would scorn him
- He came to know his sin and was shamed by it

His Transgressions:

- He did not honor his father and mother (Ex 20:12)
- He had transgressed God's commands

The Father

The father by right could have refused his son's request. Yet, acknowledging his son's desire, he granted his wishes against his own judgment. He was no doubt deeply offended, yet he kept this to himself.

The father did not seek out his son to bring him home. Unlike the lost sheep or the coin, the son had the capability to return on his own from a lost position. The father waited patiently and wisely for his son to reach the point where he was ready to return.

As the son returned, he was opening himself up to public ridicule. The father rushes out to meet him, thus shielding him from much of this rebuke. The son confesses his sin, and acknowledges that he had lost the right to sonship.

But the father immediately makes him feel at home:

- The best robe – traditionally reserved for guests of the highest honor.
- The ring – signifies authority and a return to his position as the son, not a hired servant
- The sandals – indicate that he was a free man. Slaves and the poor went barefoot.
- The fatted calf is slaughtered – enough for a celebratory feast for the whole community.

The Older Son

The parable would be ineffective without the introduction to and the reaction of the older son.

- He had been a faithful son
- He had served his father well
- He was returning late, after working all day
- Yet his position is soured by his envious attitude

When the older brother came home, according to cultural rules he would assume the position of the master of ceremonies at the celebratory banquet. This was too much for him to bear. He refused to even enter the house. As the younger son insulted his father many years before, now the older son insults his father by his refusal to enter the house and his public rebuke. So the father goes out to meet him.

The Father Loves Both Sons

- He left the house to greet both sons
- He calls both his son
- He was willing to give the rightful inheritance to both

The Older Son is Spiteful

- He saw himself as a servant, “All these years I’ve been slaving for you...”
- He accuses his father of never even giving him so much as a young goat. (It can be implied that he never asked his father for this – so it was an unjust accusation).
- His words were sharp and bitter. He refuses to address his father as “Father”
- He calls his brother This son of yours...”
- He implies sexual immorality on the part of his brother, to denigrate him.
- These words must have grieved the father as much as the first son’s leaving years ago.

Application

Jesus did not say what the outcome of the story was. By leaving the story unfinished, he implied that the outcome was wide open. Each listener would have to reflect on how they would have reacted to the situation.

It was Jesus’ intention to describe the attitude of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law toward tax collectors, prostitutes, and other religious outcasts. The question Jesus is eloquently asking is, “What happens when a tax collector or moral outcast repents?”

Jesus Shows that God’s Love is Infinite:

- His listeners recognize God as the father in the story
- They knew that sin is always foremost sin against the Father
- The father’s loving forgiveness shows the forgiveness of God when a sinner repents
- God and his angels rejoice when a sinner repents

The parable of the prodigal son proclaims the good news of the gospel. All those who turn their backs on God, who consider the church old fashioned and out of touch, who embrace a permissive society, will find a loving Father ready to accept them when they are ready to return in repentance.



Rembrandt – "The Return of the Prodigal Son" – Public Domain, Copyright Expired.

Points to Ponder

When should we allow our children to make mistakes (for their own learning) and when should we step in to "rescue" them before hand?

What actions do some people do that mimic the envious attitude of the older son in this parable?

Do we ever act in such a way as to make those who have left the church feel unwelcome to return?

Why do some people have to hit "rock bottom" before they come to their senses?

4) The Cost of Citizenship in the Kingdom (2)

Parable of the Seed Growing Secretly (Mark 4:26-29)

This is the only parable recorded only in the Gospel of Mark. Mark's gospel is not known for discourses – instead, it is a narrative in which Jesus is vividly portrayed as a man of action. Mark is selective in his choice of parables; so when he places three parables on Growth of seeds in his Gospel (all end up in Chapter 4) then we know the growth of the kingdom is an important subplot to his story.

This is a somewhat simplistic parable. Nothing is said about preparing the ground, rainfall, sunshine, weed control, or fertilizer. The life of the farmer seems parallel to that of the seed – sleeping at night, active by day. The parable bypasses all these details and focuses on “sowing, growing and mowing”.

It is implied that the farmer does not spend his days idly. He still does his part, in cultivating, controlling weeds, and watching over the crop. But ultimately, God is in control. He provides the sunshine, the rain, the pollination, the growth, the ripening, and he brings the increase.

The farmer can describe the miraculous work of God in the crop, but he cannot explain it. The farmer plants in faith, knowing that God will do his miraculous work of nature.

Interpretation

There have been several possible interpretations given for this simple parable, including:

- Allegorically – Christ has sown in time and will come to reap. For now the invisible power of the Holy Spirit does his part in the growth of the kingdom.
- Ministers of the word will sow the seed, and should not become discouraged. The rewards of their labor will ripen at the appropriate time.
- There is a difference between sowing and growing – man should not take credit for the invisible work of God in ripening men's souls for the harvest.
- The kingdom starts small (as seeds) but grows over time due to the invisible working power of God.

The ministers of the Word are in God's divine employ; they proclaim the good news of salvation in Christ Jesus. But they must stand aside while God performs the secret work of growth and development. They will see the fruits of the labor at the harvest.

Harvesting follows sowing, in due time. The manifestation of the kingdom follows the faithful ministry of God's word. The victory is sure. Harvest is approaching. Then God's kingdom will be revealed in its entire splendor.

Parallel Passages

- Joel 3:13 “Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe...”
- Rev 14:12-16, James 5:7 – Patience in reaping
- Rev 6:9-11 “Wait a little longer...”
- Matt 24:26 – Only the father knows the time of the Lord's coming
- I Cor 3:6-8 – God gives the increase

Points to Ponder

What is your interpretation of this parable?

Do we truly trust God to give the increase when we evangelize?

What actions might indicate that we are attempting to give the increase and not just sow the Word in faith?

What actions might indicate that we want God to do our part in sowing, in addition to giving the increase?

Parable of a Tower Builder and King Going Forth to Battle (Luke 14:28-33)

These twin parables are found only in the Gospel of Luke. During the time that Jesus told these parables, large crowds were accompanying him on the way from Galilee to Jerusalem.

Before telling these parables, Jesus sets the stage in laying out a statement about the cost of discipleship. Here, he says in verses 26-27, *"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."*

The crowds and his disciples saw Jesus as an earthly king, who would triumphantly ascend to the throne. They no doubt looked forward to the day when this earthly rule would result in peace, prosperity, freedom from Roman oppression, and freedom of religious worship. Jesus knew that his execution on the cross would be a blow to many, who looked forward to an earthly kingdom, rather than a spiritual kingdom. He was doing his best to make known to them the true cost of discipleship before they made up their minds to cast their lot with Him.

In Semitic terms, to hate means to love less than someone or something else (Deut 21:15). Jesus was not teaching that we are to literally hate our father or mother; rather he is saying that we must be willing to put Christ ahead of all other things; his family, his possessions, and even his own life. If Jesus is not first and foremost in your life, you are not worthy to be a true disciple. (See Matt 10:37 ff)

Being Jesus disciple implies carrying one's own cross and following him wherever he leads. The same one who said, *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened"* (Matt 11:28) also said, *"Anyone who does not carry his cross is not worthy to be my disciple"* (Luke 14:27). In Luke 9:62, Jesus taught *"No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."* Discipleship is a wholehearted commitment to Jesus.

The Parables

Jesus then teaches the two parables. One is taken from the agricultural world; the other is inspired by the political climate of the time. Both teach the same lesson.

In the first parable, a farmer decides to build a tower in his vineyard. These towers were used to provide security; a worker could keep watch over the vineyard, being on the lookout for thieves, foxes, or other dangers. By building such a tower, a vineyard owner gained respect in the community as a landowner of significant means. His property will rise in value, and his crop yield will increase.



But this prestige will turn to ridicule, if the owner does not have sufficient funds to complete the project. Before taking on such a job, he must first sit down and calculate the cost to complete the job, and ensure he has sufficient funds, including (if he is wise) extra money for contingencies. If he is not able to finish it, he will become the laughingstock of the town.

Next, Jesus moves from the farm to the palace. He tells a story of a king, preparing for battle. The king has 10,000 soldiers at his disposal. The king must prepare for battle, knowing there are two possible but very different outcomes:

1. He will win the battle – gaining plunder, wealth, power and prestige.
2. He will lose the battle – with loss of life and freedom, and his nation will be plundered by the enemy.

A dispute has arisen. Passions run high. Words of revenge and retaliation are hurled. Yet the king must put aside passion, and decide whether to go to war based on numbers and probabilities. No matter how much he has been insulted, losing in battle will be much worse. The king must provide leadership – choosing his battles carefully – in order to preserve his kingdom and his rule.

He is overmatched on numbers. But he must also take into account the readiness of his men, supplies, terrain, and weaponry available. If he determines he is not likely to win the battle, he will send a delegation to negotiate terms for peace.

In these two parables, the emphasis is the same, but the details vary.

1. Tower Builder – Count the cost before you build.
2. Warring King – Consider your chances of success before committing to battle.

“In the same way”, Jesus says, “Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.”

Analysis

Some have argued that these parables go against the great commission, where we are told to teach the gospel to every person. They argue that this parable seems to indicate that we choose the likelihood of a person or group obeying the gospel before we commit our resources in teaching them. However, the parable should not be interpreted in this way, because it does violate plain scriptural teaching, such as the great commission and 2 Peter 3:9, “...not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”

The parables teach two things very plainly:

1. The disciple of Jesus must think things through very carefully, counting the cost of being a disciple.
2. The disciple must be willing to give things up for Jesus.

Discipleship should not be based on pure emotion, or shallow enthusiasm. These will fade. Rather, discipleship should be a firm decision, thought through, with full conviction and commitment for the long haul.

- We count the cost of following Christ
- We analyze the risks – to our relationships, families, careers, or even our lives
- We put Jesus first and take up our cross to follow him

Points to Ponder

Three times in the Bible Jesus uses the phrase, “Cannot be my disciple” – all of them are in Luke 14:

1. Luke 14:26 – If we do not put Jesus ahead of others...
2. Luke 14:27 - If we do not bear our cross
3. Luke 14:33 – If we do not forsake all we have

How can we better prepare new Christians to “count the cost” and be prepared to follow Jesus for the rest of their lives?

What are some evidences or specific examples that as a church body we do not always “fully count the cost” before taking on some task? How can we prevent this in the future?

What does it mean to “bear our cross”?

In what way should we “forsake all we have”? Should we get rid of all earthly possessions? How should this be interpreted?

In regard to “asking for terms of peace” – does this mean we should be willing to compromise with other religious groups?

Parable of a Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21)

As is the case with many parables, it is important that we start by examining the context. As Luke 12 begins, many thousands of people are thronging around Jesus – in their excitement to see the Master they even are trampling one another. At one point, someone in the crowd shouts out to Jesus, “*Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.*” In this case, the father died and the younger brother believes that the older brother did not fulfill his obligations in correctly dividing up the estate. (See Deut 21:17)

Jesus does not desire to get entangled in these earthly, material matters. Jesus was concerned with spiritual matters, not material matters. He had no desire to get pulled into being a judge among people – they already had their courts and arbitrators for these types of issues.

The younger brother wanted to use Jesus as an arbitrator. He saw him as a servant, not a teacher. Because many rabbis were schooled in the law and served as judges, the man did not see a distinction between them and Christ.

Rather than receiving help from Jesus, Jesus addresses the crowd and gives them a warning against greed. Perhaps Jesus knew the man's heart, and knew he was seeking to gain more than his fair share. We are not told. But it was an excellent opportunity to warn against the spiritual danger of greed. Greed is idolatry (Col 3:5) – the worship of other things ahead of the creator. And we are warned that greedy people do not inherit the kingdom of God (Eph 5:3-5).

Jesus words are elaborated on in 1 Tim 6:7-8. *“For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that”*. Food, clothing and shelter are the basic necessities of life. Anything above this is to be considered abundance.

The Parable

Several years ago, there was a small book that captured the imagination of millions. Written by Charles Schultz, the creator of the comic strip Peanuts, it was called, “Happiness is a Warm Puppy.” This contained simple things to be happy for, such as “Happiness is a thumb and a blanket”. But there was nothing in this book about happiness being tied to having money.



In this parable, Jesus points out that satisfaction does not depend upon earthy blessings. There is something more important. Wealth often brings about unhappiness – divorce, spoiled children, and not even knowing if you have true friends.

In the parable, note how many times the rich fool uses “I” and “my” – demonstrating his selfish attitude and pride:

1. What shall **I** do?
2. **I** have no place to store...
3. ... **my** crops.
4. This is what **I'll** do...
5. **I** will tear down my barns...
6. ... there **I** will store ...
7. ... all **my** grain ...
8. ... and all **my** goods.
9. And **I'll** say ...
10. ... to **myself**
11. **You** have plenty of good things...

But God puts him in his place, using the emphasis on “you”:

1. **You** fool...
2. This very night **your** life will ...
3. ... be demanded from **you**.
4. Then who will get what **you** have prepared ...
5. ... for **yourself**?

This parable no doubt brought to remembrance to the disciples the words of Prov 3:10. *“...then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.”* It would also bring to mind Deut 28:8, *“The LORD will send a blessing on your barns and on everything you put your hand to. The LORD your God will bless you in the land he is giving you.”*

The rich fool showed contempt to God by tearing down his barns and building bigger ones. He wanted to be in complete control of the situation. He put foremost his own ease, pleasure, and security. Worst of all, he had no regard for those around him who were less fortunate. He

demonstrated an utter disregard for the most important commandments, *“Love the Lord God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself.”* (Luke 10:27)

He failed to thank God for the riches received. His life was centered on himself and himself alone. But God calls on us to give an account for what we have been entrusted. This man’s spiritual bank account was at zero – and when our lives are taken, the bank will be closed, and the balance can not be altered.

The parable teaches that:

1. Life’s riches belong to God
2. We need to thank God when we are blessed – and share our blessings with those who need our support.
3. When our life ends, there is no time then to change how we have lived our lives.
4. When we live for ourselves, we are spiritually dead.

Points to Ponder

Does this parable teach that we should shun earthly riches? Is it wrong, for example, to invest in our retirement, to build up a net worth, in order to take care of our family in the future?

When we are asked by strangers for financial help, we often have two conflicting principles:

- 1) Help the needy – “just a cup of cold water”...
- 2) Being a good steward of God’s money.

Reconciling these two principles can be difficult. Do we give money to strangers, not knowing if they are truly deserving, or what they will spend it on? How can we best resolve this conflict?

What does I Tim 6:9-11 say about money and the root of all evil?

Can you think of men of God in the Bible who were wealthy? (Abraham, David, Solomon, Job...) Was it considered wrong for them to have this wealth?

Discuss Matt 6:19-21 - *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”*

Parable of the Empty House (Luke 11:24-26; Matt 12:43-45)

This parable is part of a long discourse in response to the Pharisees, who had accused Jesus of being able to cast out demons only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons (Matt. 12:24).

- Jesus responds with several parables about the power of God and the danger of attributing that power to Satan.
- The Pharisees then ask for a sign, to prove that he is not acting by Satan’s power.
- Jesus again responds with teaching and parables, teaching that no sign will be given except for the sign of Jonah.
- The parable he tells is the parable of the unclean spirit returning to the empty house. So, this parable is told in a setting of conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees.

The subject of the parable is a house occupied by an undesirable tenant. When the tenant vacates or is evicted, the house is swept and made neat and clean. However the house is left unoccupied. The tenant who left, unable to find anywhere else to live, sneaks back to the house bringing seven other homeless with him, and they all move in and become squatters.

What makes this parable unusual is that the tenant is a demon and the house is a human being. Most parables picture simple physical things --vineyards, houses, sheep, business, banquets, etc. This parable enters into the metaphysical. Only one other parable, the Rich Man and Lazarus, does that. In this parable Jesus simply describes some familiar facts about demon possession. The people listening to Jesus would not find the parable strange, because they knew from experience that demons could enter into a person and do him harm.

Demons were most likely "fallen angels":

- 2 Peter 2:4
- Jude 6
- Rev 12:3-5

The parable describes one who has been freed from an evil spirit. To whom is that metaphor referring? At least three possibilities have been proposed:

1. The physically exorcised individuals who did not become spiritual followers of Jesus
2. The crowds who came to hear Jesus teach but did not enter the Kingdom of God
3. The Jewish nation, delivered from bondage and captivity, who fell victim to a legalistic religious system

The message of the parable allows it to be true of all three, but the literary setting in Matthew leans toward the third option. Only Matthew's account of this parable adds the conclusion, "*That is how it will be with this wicked generation.*" As with many of Jesus' parables, this one invites a response from His hearers, the Pharisees.

The parable is aimed at the Pharisees who were maligning Jesus. The typical Pharisee was certainly like a house "swept clean and put in order", for he lived in a most orderly, scrupulous, and religious manner. The problem was that he was an empty house, a house "unoccupied". Though he zealously purified himself by religious rituals, he neglected to fill himself with justice, mercy, and compassion. So he was a nice neat house but untenanted, just waiting for evil to come back and "squat". Since the discussion had been about casting out demons, Jesus used that topic as an analogy of an even worse problem suffered by the Pharisees.

We learn from this parable that when we get rid of evil, we must fill the void with good, otherwise the evil will come back with a vengeance. It is like weeding a garden but neglecting to fill it with good plants and leaving the ground bare. Many more weeds will soon infest the soil than you removed to begin with.

To make ourselves ready for judgment day, we cannot be satisfied with merely ridding ourselves of evil. We must also fill ourselves up with good. When we consider the "deeds of the flesh" (Gal 5:19-21), we should be rid of these. Yet we must also go on to consider "the fruits of the Spirit" and make up our minds that we will be filled with these (Gal 5:22-25).

1. On an individual level, a person who has been forgiven and cleansed can choose not to have the new tenant move in. The house is ready for the arrival of a guest of honor—the Holy Spirit. It is sadly true that one can reject His arrival and allow other things to take over one's life.

2. On a societal level today, as with the crowds who heard Jesus teach, there is much interest in spirituality. There is interest in purifying one's soul, getting rid of evil, living a moral life, and achieving harmony with one's inner self. The crowds are interested, in large measure, in spirituality – but they often reject the teachings of Jesus. Many are listening and choosing not to enter the Kingdom of God. Sadly, the parable indicates that their final condition will be worse than the first.
3. Finally, as a church, we must hear the message of the parable as it applied to God's people. We cannot legislate holiness, or replace true love with rituals or programs. We cannot simply look pure or righteous from the outside. We must sweep our house clean and allow the new tenant, the Spirit of God, to move in and reign.

Points to Ponder

Three possible interpretations of the parable are given. Should we seek to apply it only to the best interpretation? Or is it valid to apply it to all three? How should we apply what we learn from this parable?

When we sweep our house clean, what are the things that most often come crowding back in, like unwanted squatters?

Since the church is the "body of Christ", how do we "sweep clean" our body?

What should we be doing as a church to prevent our "house" from becoming "unoccupied" spiritually?

In the "Judgment Parables", men are condemned, not for doing evil, but for NOT doing good. What does that tell us about how we should live our own lives?

5) Growth and Effectiveness of the Kingdom

Parable of the Mustard Seed (Matt 13:31; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19)

Jesus told two parables in which he describes the rapid and phenomenal growth of the Kingdom:

- The parable of the mustard seed portrays the extensive growth of the Kingdom.
- The parable of the yeast portrays the intensive growth of the Kingdom.

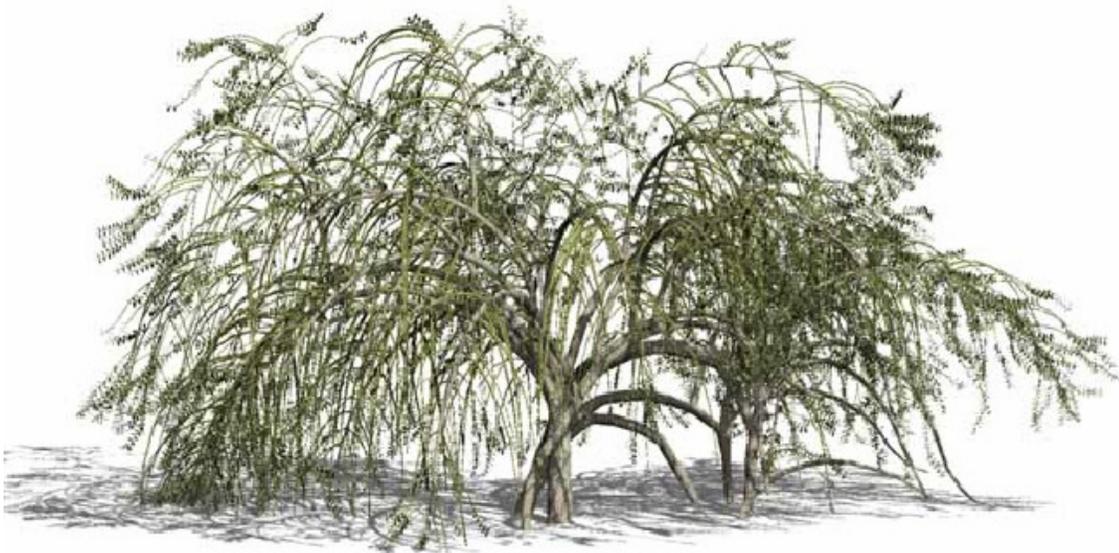


These are treated differently by the Gospel writers:

- Both of these are placed in the so-called “parable chapter”, chapter 13 of Matthew.
- Luke, by placing these in his so-called “travel narrative” (Luke 9:51 – 19:27) may be indicating that they were told in this sequential order.
- Mark tells the parable of the mustard seed, but not the parable of the yeast.

Fun Facts about Mustard

- Mustards are several plants whose small mustard seeds are used as a spice and, by grinding and mixing them with water, vinegar or other liquids, are turned into the condiment known as mustard.



- The edible leaves can be eaten as mustard greens.
- The mustard of which Jesus spoke was likely mild white mustard (*Sinapis hirta*) which grows wild in North Africa, the Middle East and Mediterranean
- Canada grows 90% of all the mustard seed for the international market. The Canadian province of Saskatchewan produces almost half of the world's supply of mustard seed.
- The genus *Brassica* also includes cabbages, cauliflower and turnips.

In this parable, Jesus stresses the size difference between the small mustard seed, and the mustard “plant” or “tree.” He is focused on the growth and difference in size; he does not stress at all any of the other qualities of the plant. The small seed, starting at 2 mm (5/64 in.) grows to a height of 10-12 feet, the *“largest of all the garden plants.”*

This is another example out of everyday life. In Jesus time, most people at least had a garden plot – and most people would directly or indirectly make their living from farming. It was for the most part an agricultural society. Even the clergy of the day gathered spices from their own gardens (Matt 23:23). Quite often, the mustard seed would be planted in the corners of the garden. Even today, mustard plants grow in the wild, and along the roads in the Middle East.

Note that each gospel writer uses a different terminology:

- In Matthew the gardener plants the seed in a field
- In Mark the seed is planted in the ground
- In Luke the seed is planted in a garden

In Biblical times, the mustard seed was used proverbially as a small object. In Matt 17:20, Jesus taught, *“...if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”*

When Jesus spoke of the birds resting in the branches of the mustard plant, this no doubt brought to memory several Old Testament prophecies:

- Daniel 4:12 – The tree in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream
- Ezekiel 17:23 – The tender shoot becomes a cedar
- Ezekiel 31:6 – Assyria compared to a tall cedar

Jesus taught that God’s kingdom might seem insignificant at the time he uttered this parable – but phenomenal growth was soon to come. Jesus followers consisted of a few uneducated fishermen and laborers who were told to make disciples of all nations. What an impossible task this must have seemed to them! But the tiny seed of Christianity sown in Galilee has become a tree that shelters countless millions. And yet the day is not spent.

Points to Ponder

God is still at work growing his Kingdom. Yet we know countless people on the earth have not yet heard the gospel. What should we do in this situation?

Do we have faith that our work will result in spectacular growth? Do we lack the faith “as small as a mustard seed”?

Parable of the Yeast (Matt 13:33; Luke 13:20-21)

In Jesus' day, leaven was sourdough in a state of fermentation. When mixed into the dough, it caused the bread to rise when baked, as does yeast today.

Sourdough (or natural leaven) refers to the process of leavening bread by capturing wild yeasts in a dough or batter, as opposed to using domestic, purpose-cultured yeast. Sourdough is no longer the standard method for bread leavening in most developed countries, as it has been replaced by cultured yeasts. However, some form of natural leaven is still used by many specialty bakeries.

Sourdough bread is made by using a small amount of "starter" dough which contains the yeast culture, and mixing it with new flour and water. Part of this resulting dough is then saved to use as the starter for the next batch. As long as the starter dough is fed flour and water daily, the



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sourdough mixture can stay in room temperature indefinitely and remain healthy and usable. It is not uncommon for a baker's starter dough to have years of history, from many hundreds of previous batches. As a result, each bakery's sourdough has a distinct taste.

The traditional teaching is that the Parable of the Leaven, like the preceding Parable of the Mustard Seed, shows how something small becomes something big. However, in modern times, the parable has been interpreted differently by some because in everyday Jewish imagery, leaven was tied to corruption.

Leaven was spoken of metaphorically by Jesus and Paul to symbolize the doctrine of men being mixed with the doctrine of God, thereby corrupting it:

- Matt 16:5-12 "...be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees."
- Gal 5:7-10 – "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough." – warning that false teaching could corrupt the entire church.

A parable that likened God's Kingdom to "a little leaven" was bound to startle any Jewish audience. The Gospel writers chose these graphic images of leaven and of mustard seed to illustrate God's kingdom because of the innate characteristic of these particular pieces of organic matter to spread dramatically and dominate everything around them.

The dramatic imagery of this parable is made even more striking by the amount of flour that the woman adds the leaven to. The three "measures" (three satas, or one ephah) that the woman uses in this parable amounts to half a bushel (almost 18 liters) or more than 30 pounds of flour. That would make at least 40 large loaves or sufficient bread to feed at a few hundred people.

- Lest this seem ridiculous, remember that Sarah baked this much bread when the three men visited at Mamre (Gen 18:6).
- This amount is also mentioned in Judges 6:19 and 1 Samuel 1:24

In this case, the leaven is not intended to bring forth negative connotations. The extraordinary imagery in the parable of the leaven was designed to leave the minds of Jewish audience with the idea that there would be a super-abundant yield in due time rather than immediately. It shows the “hidden power” of the church – that it would grow rapidly and affect the entire world. The yeast is hidden from sight, yet it affects the entire loaf. That is how the Kingdom of God demonstrates its power and presence in the world.

Points to Ponder

The mustard seed parable illustrates God’s global evangelistic program. The yeast parable illustrates that those converted members of the church would then in turn have an effect on their families, neighbors, and communities. The follower of Christ let’s his light shine before men, that they may see his good works (Matt 5:16).

- Providing comfort and aid to those in need
- Championing the causes of the oppressed
- Demanding honesty in political and business transactions
- Elevating the standards of morals and decency

What is life like in areas of the world where the influence of Christianity is dim?

What are some positive ways in which you have seen the world influenced by Christianity?

Parable of the Strong One Defeated (Luke 11:21-23; Matt 12:29)

Jesus is working among the crowds. During this time, he casts a demon out of a man who was mute. The man immediately begins speaking, and the entire crowd is amazed. Driven by jealousy, some religious leaders accuse Jesus of casting demons out by the power of Beelzebul (or Beelzebub), the prince of demons. Others, still doubting Jesus, ask him for a sign from heaven.

Jesus, knowing their thoughts, then said to them, *“Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall. If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand? I say this because you claim that I drive out demons by Beelzebub. Now if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your followers drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you.”* (Luke 11:17-20)

It is in this context that Jesus tells this short parable, of the strong man who is defeated.

To interpret the parable, we must answer, “who is the strong man?” and, “who is the attacker?”

Consider three possible scenarios, and think about which is the most likely:

	Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Scenario 3
Strong Man:	Jesus	Christians	Satan
Attacker:	Satan	Satan	Jesus
Moral:	If Jesus was aligned with Satan, it would be foolish for him to cast our demons. absurd.	Be on guard, lest Satan destroy your faith.	Jesus is stronger than Satan, and by casting out demons proves he is not aligned with Satan.

This parable forms part of the “Beelzebub controversy”, where Jesus’ opponents accuse him of gaining his power to exorcise by being in league with Satan. According to some interpretations, the strong man represents Satan, and the burglar represents Jesus. Jesus thus says that he could not perform exorcisms (represented by stealing the strong man's possessions) unless he was opposed to and stronger than Satan (represented by tying up the strong man). It has been suggested that the image of the strong man's house was originally a word play on "Beelzebub", which literally means "house of Baal".

When Jesus cast our demons, the effect was that it destroyed them and their power. He did not have to do it by any compact with them, for he was stronger, and could do it by force. By doing so, he was routing Satan, and taking from him all his armor.

The message can be taken to heart by all who hear the gospel, and who must decide where to put their allegiance – to Christ, or to Satan.

The heart of every unconverted sinner is the devil's palace, where he resides and rules:

- He works in the children of disobedience.
- His will is obeyed, his interests are served, and the militia is in his hands; he has control of the throne in the soul.
- The devil, as a strong man armed, keeps this palace, does all he can to secure it to himself, and to fortify it against Christ.
- All the prejudices with which he hardens men's hearts against truth and holiness are the strong-holds which he erects for the keeping of his palace; this palace is his garrison.

There is a kind of peace in the palace of an unconverted soul:

- The devil, as a strong man armed, keeps it.
- The sinner has a good opinion of himself; he feels secure, and has no doubt concerning the goodness of his state.
- He has no dread of the judgment to come.
- He flatters himself in his own eyes, and cries peace to himself.
- Before Christ appeared, all was quiet; but the preaching of the gospel disturbed the peace of the devil's palace.

But a wonderful change is made when someone is converted:

- Christ achieves victory over the usurper – just as he achieved victory over the demon that possessed the mute man.
- Satan is a strong man armed; but our Lord Jesus is stronger than he.

The conversion of a soul to God is Christ's victory over the devil:

- He restores the soul to its liberty.
- He takes from Satan all his armor. When the power of sin and corruption in the soul is broken, when the mistakes are rectified, the eyes of the sinner are opened. Then the heart is humbled and changed, and made serious and spiritual. This is the removal of Satan's armor.
- Christ divides the spoils of the heart; he takes possession of them for himself. All the abilities of mind and body, the power and interest, which before were made use of in the service of sin and Satan, are now converted to Christ's service.

Since the whole purpose of Christ's doctrine and miracles was to break the power of the devil, that great enemy of mankind, it is the duty of all to join with him and to follow his guidance.

- We are to receive his gospel and gladly – to do otherwise would be considered siding with the enemy (Luke 11:23)
- “He that is not with me is against me.” Those who rejected the doctrine of Christ, and rejected his miracles, were looked upon as his adversaries, and in the devil's interest.
- With this simple statement (verse 23) Jesus completely turns the situation around; Now it is shown that those men who accused Jesus are actually the ones aligned with Satan!

Points to Ponder

An alternative interpretation of the parable, which does not depend on the context of the Beelzebul controversy, suggests that "shrewd planning and careful strategy" are necessary in order to accomplish one's goals. Do you feel this is an appropriate interpretation?

Why did some ask Jesus for a sign “from heaven”?

Why did Jesus refuse to give this sign?

Parable of the Barren Fruit Tree (Luke 13:6-9)

This parable is about a fig tree in a vineyard. The fig tree failed to bear fruit for three seasons, so the vineyard owner told the vineyard keeper to cut it down and put the ground to better use. But the vineyard keeper interceded for the fig tree and asked that it be given another season and some encouragement, to see whether it might bear fruit the next year. If it still failed, then it would be cut down.

The fig tree was common throughout Biblical Israel. There was even a saying, from the time of Solomon, “During Solomon's lifetime Judah and Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, lived in safety, each man under his own vine and fig tree.” (1 Kings 4:25) During the summer, the fig tree provides ample shade. But the leaves do fall off with the approach of winter. But it is a reliable harbinger of spring; as Jesus stated, *“Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.”* (Luke 21:29-31) This statement in itself is a parable.

After a fruit tree was planted, according to the Law of Moses, you were not to eat its fruit for a period of 3 years. (Lev 19:23). Then, in the fourth year, the fruit could only be given as an offering. Only in the fifth year could the fruit be eaten. (Lev 19:24-25) A barren fig tree was a

burden to the owner. It could be cut down and vines planted in its place – yielding a cash crop in a few years.

Throughout the Bible, a fig tree was used to symbolize the nation of Israel. When God was displeased with the nation, he would make it known by referring to their lack of fruit. Israel had received a prime spot in God's orchard. Yet she was often failed to match that privilege with duty. (Jer 8:13; Hosea 9:10; Hab 3:17; Isa 34:4; Jer 5:17; Hosea 2:12)

Verses 6-7 of Luke 13 relate what the vineyard owner (who represents God the Father) said to the vineyard keeper (who represents God the Son). The vineyard owner's words illustrate the severity of God toward those who are disobedient and fail to bear fruit.

Verses 8-9 relate what the vineyard keeper replied to the vineyard owner. The vineyard keeper's words illustrate the goodness and longsuffering of God in giving opportunity and encouragement for the unfruitful and disobedient to repent. The vineyard keeper's plea on behalf of the condemned fig tree represents the intercession of Jesus Christ for us (Rom 8:34, Heb 7:25).

Verse 9 uses that little but important word "if" to show that our remaining in God's grace and in the body of Christ is conditional upon us being obedient and fruitful. It is interesting to compare this parable with the fruitless fig tree that Jesus made to wither (Matt 21:18-19).

God's patience is limited by time. At the end of the day, judgment will come. The time of grace that God gives us should be used to repent and turn back to Him. The same sentiment is echoed in the Book of Hebrews, where the writer warns Christians to pay close attention to the gospel: "For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?" (Heb 2:2-3)

Points to Ponder

The parable may be symbolically linked to the cursing of the fig tree. It is interesting that only Luke has recorded the parable of the barren fig tree; and of the synoptic evangelists he is the only one who does not have the account of Jesus cursing the fig tree.

Rev 22:20 says, "He who testifies to these things says, *"Yes, I am coming soon. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus."* From this we sometimes hear in prayer, "Lord come quickly." On the other hand, if we are to emulate the vineyard keeper in this parable, we should pray for more time for sinners to repent. How do you resolve these differences?

Why do you think Israelites were forbidden from picking the fruit of a new tree for three years?

6) Ungodliness in the Kingdom

Parable of the Weeds (Matt 13:24-30, 36-43)

In this parable, the word “weeds” or “tares” is translated from the Greek *zizania*, which refers to “a troublesome weed in the grain fields, resembling wheat.” This plant has the appearance of wheat, and grows exclusively in cultivated fields. In fact, these weeds have degenerated from the cultivated wheat plant. It can be compared to wild oats, which grows in North American wheat fields and is difficult to eradicate.

After telling the Parable of the Sower, Jesus immediately launches into the Parable of the Weeds. Like any efficient farmer, the landowner has obtained good seed for his crop. He sows this good seed in his field. But under cover of night, his enemy comes. While everyone is sleeping, he sows seeds on top of the wheat. A little effort goes a long way. Scattering seed here and there, he poisons the entire crop. No-one will know until the wheat and weeds sprout their heads of grain, and then it will become obvious – “...by their fruit you will recognize them.” (Matt 7:20)

By that time it is much too late to do anything about the problem. If you enter the fields, you will trample the good crop along with the weeds. Moreover, if you attempt to pull out the weeds, the roots are intertwined with the good wheat and both will be pulled out. The farmer informs his servants to wait until both are ripe – then the weeds will be collected, tied into bundles, and burned for fuel.

The weeds take up moisture and nutrients intended for the good wheat. Thus, even though the weeds are removed, his yield of good crop is still less than expected.

Jesus’ disciples ask for an explanation of the parable – and Jesus provides it.

1. The one who sowed the good seed – is the Son of Man (Jesus)
2. The field – is the world
3. The good seed – stands for sons of the kingdom
4. The weeds – are the sons of the evil one
5. The enemy who sows them – is the devil
6. The harvest – is the end of the age
7. The harvesters – are angels

Jesus omits some details from his explanation, such as:

- No mention that the enemy came while people were sleeping
- Nothing is said about the gathering of the wheat into barns
- No mention of the burning of the weeds in fire

Perhaps these details are ignored to focus attention on the deeper significance of the parable – the battle between good and evil, between God and Satan. And in this conflict, Satan loses the battle.

As usual, Jesus' teaching directly reflects the Old Testament scriptures:

- Weeding out the kingdom – Zeph 1:2-3
- Fiery furnace – Dan 3:6
- Stubble (weeds) – Mal 4:1
- Righteous shining like the sun – Dan 12:3

Application

Jesus' parable contrasts the good with the bad, and teaches that in the end, good will triumph. Disciples of Jesus are to remain patient until the end, and then Jesus will judge, casting aside those who opposed his good works. We live in an age in which evil and good exist together, and the roots of good and evil are tangled together. It is clear however that good and evil remain distinct, and the evil can be recognized as evil, and the good as good. You can look at one stalk and say, "This is a tare", or at another stalk and say, "This is wheat". Knowing the difference is not the problem.

The servants reflect the impatient mood of many Christians in God's kingdom. Some are anxious to "write off" sinners before the appropriate time. Others may argue that under the banner of maintaining purity in the church, judgment should be passed on fellow believers with whom we have a disagreement, cutting them off from the church. If we are not careful, this judgment may be arrived at based on emotion, opinion or fervor, rather than Biblical teaching.

But this parable should not be the criteria to engage in church discipline. Rather, we should stick to the teachings of Jesus on discipline, in Matthew 18:15-17. Church discipline is to be conducted in a loving and gentle spirit, with the aim to save and restore the person involved.

This parable teaches us to be patient, and not act as self appointed judges. James 5:8-9 states, *"You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!"*

Points to Ponder

At first sight, this parable may leave us with the impression that there are only two kinds of people, good and bad, and that these never change. However, the scriptures do not teach that men are "either" good or bad – God creates people as his handiwork, and we are free to choose our path. Wicked people, although created by God, have been corrupted by Satan.

What do you think are the role of angels in the judgment? (See Luke 16:22, Acts 12:23)

Who does the field – the world – belong to?

On one hand, we are to follow the example and be patient, waiting for Jesus to judge all of mankind. On the other hand, we are told to "watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them." (Rom 16:17). How do we reconcile these two commands?

Parable of the Drag-Net (Matt 13:47-50)

In this parable, Jesus likens the kingdom of heaven to a net, which is lowered into a lake, catching all kinds of fish. When the net is full, the fishermen pull it to shore, separating the good fish from the bad.

Insight on the various elements of this parable and their meanings can be drawn directly from the second half of the parable itself (Matthew 13:49-50), and also from Jesus' own explanation of the Parable of the Weeds (Matthew 13:36-43).

Net. The initial likening of the Kingdom of Heaven to a net being let down into the lake is very similar to the beginning of the Parable of the Weeds (Matthew 13:31-35). In that parable, the one who sowed the good seed is the "Son of Man", a term Jesus often used to refer to himself. In this parable, Jesus can be thought of as the one who lays the net down into the water.

Lake. The lake in this parable is the world. This connection can be made by taking from Jesus' interpretation of his Parable of the Weeds, where he states that the field in which the seed is sown is analogous to the world (Matthew 13:38). The specific lake to which this parable refers is most likely the Sea of Galilee, located in northeast Palestine, near modern day Golan Heights.



Fishermen in the Sea of Galilee, 1890-1900 (Public Domain)

Fish. The fish represent people of the world - some who follow God, and some of who do not. In this way, there are many kinds of people, just as there were many types of fish in the Sea of Galilee.

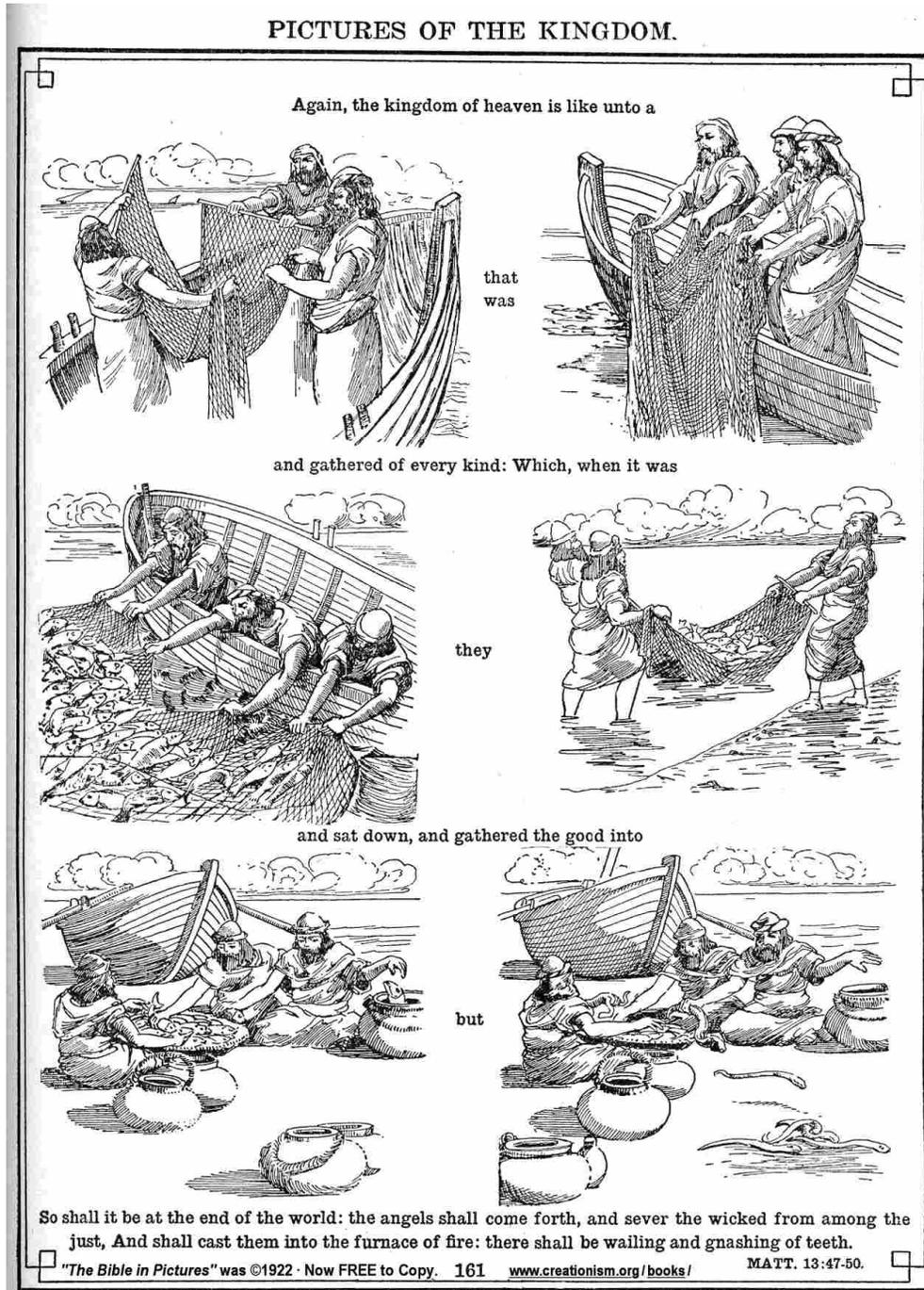
In ancient Israel, there were at least 54 different kinds of fish in the Sea of Galilee. The good fish and the bad fish had to be separated upon drawing them from the sea. The bad fish were tossed back, leaving the ones that were of value.

Fishermen. Jesus indicates at the end of his parable that the fishermen represent the angels who will come "at the end of the age" and "separate the wicked from the righteous".

Separating the Fish. The act of separating the fish represents the angels carrying out the judgment of God upon the people of the earth. The wicked will be thrown "into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 13:50).

Points to Ponder

It is the heart and spirit of man that counts in the kingdom of God. When God's angels pull in the great dragnet one day, and the fish are sorted, that is what will distinguish the good from the rubbish --not a man's wealth, not his power and glory in this world, but whether his heart is right with God. What does it take to make a man's heart right with God?



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Parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14-30)

In Matthew Chapter 24, Jesus completes a long discourse on the end of the age, the context covering both his teachings on the upcoming destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the world. In this context, Jesus then teaches two parables dealing with the end of time – the Parable of the Virgins, and the Parable of the Talents.

The Parable of the Talents, the longest parable in the book of Matthew, teaches that followers of Christ must be faithful by promptly and efficiently administering what has been entrusted to them, because we will answer for this on the Day of Judgment.

The parable tells of a master who was leaving his home to travel, and before going gave his three servants different amounts of money. On returning from his travels, the master asked his servants for an account of the money given to them.

The first servant reported that he was given five talents, and he had made five talents more. The master praised the servant as being good and faithful, gave him more responsibility because of his faithfulness, and invited the servant to be joyful together with him.

The second servant said that he had received two talents, and he had made two talents more. The master praised this servant in the same way as being good and faithful.

The last servant who had received one talent reported that knowing his master was a hard man; he buried his talent in the ground for safekeeping, and therefore returned the original amount to his master. The master called him a wicked and lazy servant, saying that he should have placed the money in the bank to generate interest. The master commanded that the one talent be taken away from that servant, and given to the servant with ten talents, because everyone that has much will be given more, and whoever that has a little, even the little that he has will be taken away. And the master ordered the servant to be thrown outside into the darkness where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth."

A similar parable, called The Parable of the Minas or The Parable of the Pounds is found in Luke 19:12-27, the main difference being that the master entrusted his servants with equal amounts, and that a mina was of much less value than a talent.



Woodcut from *Historiae celebrioris Veteris Testamenti Iconibus representatae*. 1712. Public Domain.

Talents were used as a unit of currency. Different kinds of talent were in use. However, even the lowest value for a talent puts it as worth several thousand denarii, and a denarius was the usual payment for a day's labor. So a talent was the value of many years of work.

The Master Knew His Servants Well

- In oriental fashion, he treats them as partners in his enterprise. Through their stewardship, they could earn shares in the enterprise.
- He had learned to appreciate their capabilities.
- He trusted them with his wealth.
- He knew enough about each that he entrusted each with a different amount
 - He had utmost confidence in the servant to which he entrusted 20 talents
 - He had confidence in the second servant – but not as much. Perhaps he was younger, and not fully proven.
 - He had doubts about the third – but hoped for the best.

The One Talent Servant

- May have felt slighted – the amount he was entrusted with was less, and would have been openly shared
- He knew his master was a hard man and would demand an increase. But the profit on one talent would be less than on five or ten.
- He buries it – ensuring no profit, but also mitigating any risk. He played it safe.

The Day of Reckoning

- Eventually the Master comes
- The servants are gathered together to report and reconcile their accounts
- The Master wants to see if they were worthy of the trust he placed in them

The Good Servants

- They give the Master the initial money and the extra amount earned
- They do not call attention to themselves – rather, they simply show what they had gained additionally
- They are told, “Well done”, and called “good and faithful”
- They are put in charge of many things
- They are told to share in the Master's happiness – in other words, to be rewarded by eating at his table.

The One Talent Servant

- This servant does not praise his Master for the generosity he shows to the other servants or for putting his trust in him by giving him one talent to invest.
- Instead, he describes his master as a hard man
- His speech is contradictory – he admits he knows the master will judge him for his efforts – but he does nothing about it. He has no profit to show.
- Perhaps he is bitter that less confidence was shown in him. Therefore, it is as though he is getting even – by burying the money and not putting it to use.
- But with words from his own mouth he is judged.
- His own envious and selfish nature is exposed.
- He returns the talent – then seems to wait for some word of commendation.

The Punishment of the Single Talent Servant

- He is called wicked and lazy.
- He is told that he should have invested his money with the bankers.
- His money is stripped from him and given to the five-talent servant.
- He is thrown out of the house into darkness and punishment, judged worthless.

Application

During the absence of Jesus, his followers are expected to work diligently with the gifts he has entrusted to them:

- We cannot let fear overshadow love, trust and faith, as with the one-talent servant.
- The Christian who puts his talents to work will reap great dividends.
- He should be more concerned with the interests of the Master than with his own.
- Whatever he has belongs to the Lord.
- The talents he has have been entrusted to him by the Lord.

Jesus knows the capability of each of us. We all have different gifts, different abilities.

- One follower may not be good at teaching – but may be good at making money to enable to work of others.
- Some are teachers, some preachers, some encouragers.
- Some are leaders; others, followers.
- Some are good at exhorting; others at showing mercy.
- Whatever our gifts, God expects an increase.

The central message of the parable is that faithfulness is important. There is no room for drones – only worker bees.

The parable brings to mind the passage, *“Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city.”* (Rev 22:14)

Points to Ponder

Some scholars have speculated on a possible second meaning for this parable. According to this interpretation, the master of the story is described not as a good man, but an evil one:

- This is reinforced by the claim of the third servant: "You are a hard man, reaping where you have not sown". It is interpreted that he is an aristocrat, an absentee-landlord, whose sole interest is maximizing his financial gain. Only the third servant refuses to participate in the game of increasing his lord's financial wealth "at the costs of the poor":
- The servant's frank remark shows him to be a "whistle-blower". He calls the aristocrat harsh and merciless (which are not God-like qualities).
- He exposes the sham of what has occurred: the other servants have allowed themselves to be used for exploitative purposes, for which they will also be rewarded.
- The point of the parable is to show how much it can cost for an underling to expose the truth about injustice in society. Jesus' hearers, for the most part poor villagers, would learn from the parable not to play into the hands of the ruling elite.

What do you think of this interpretation? (Hint: Who is the parable directed toward? What is the context of the parable? What events and teachings surround it?)

The parable is apparently the origin of the use of the word 'talent' to use a skill or ability, from the common interpretation of the story to teach that we are under a moral obligation to use our abilities rather than bury them.

Are we born with talents – or are they developed? What obligations do we have to develop talents?

Why are some blessed with more talents than others – is this fair?

Parable of the Pounds (Luke 19:11-27)

As we read this parable, it is introduced by giving reasons why Jesus applied this teaching:

1. Because he was close to Jerusalem
2. Because the crowd supposed that the kingdom of God was immediately to appear.

It is imperative that we remember these reasons as we interpret the parable.

As Jesus told this parable, it would have brought to mind to the listeners a political situation that had directly affected the nation of Israel several years previously, involving Herod Archaeus (23 BC – c. 18 AD) who was the Ethnarch of Samaria, Judea, and Edom from 4 BC to 6 AD. He was the son of Herod the Great and the half-brother of Herod Philip I:

- Archaeus received the kingdom of Judea by the last will of his father, though a previous will had bequeathed it to his brother Antipas.
- He was proclaimed king by the army, but declined to assume the title until he had submitted his claims to Caesar Augustus in Rome.
- Before setting out, he quelled with the utmost cruelty a sedition led by the Pharisees, slaying nearly three thousand of them.
- In Rome he was opposed by Antipas and by many of the Jews, who feared his cruelty; but in 4 BC Augustus allotted to him the greater part of the kingdom (Samaria, Judea, and Idumea) with the title of ethnarch until 6 AD when Judea was brought under direct Roman rule.

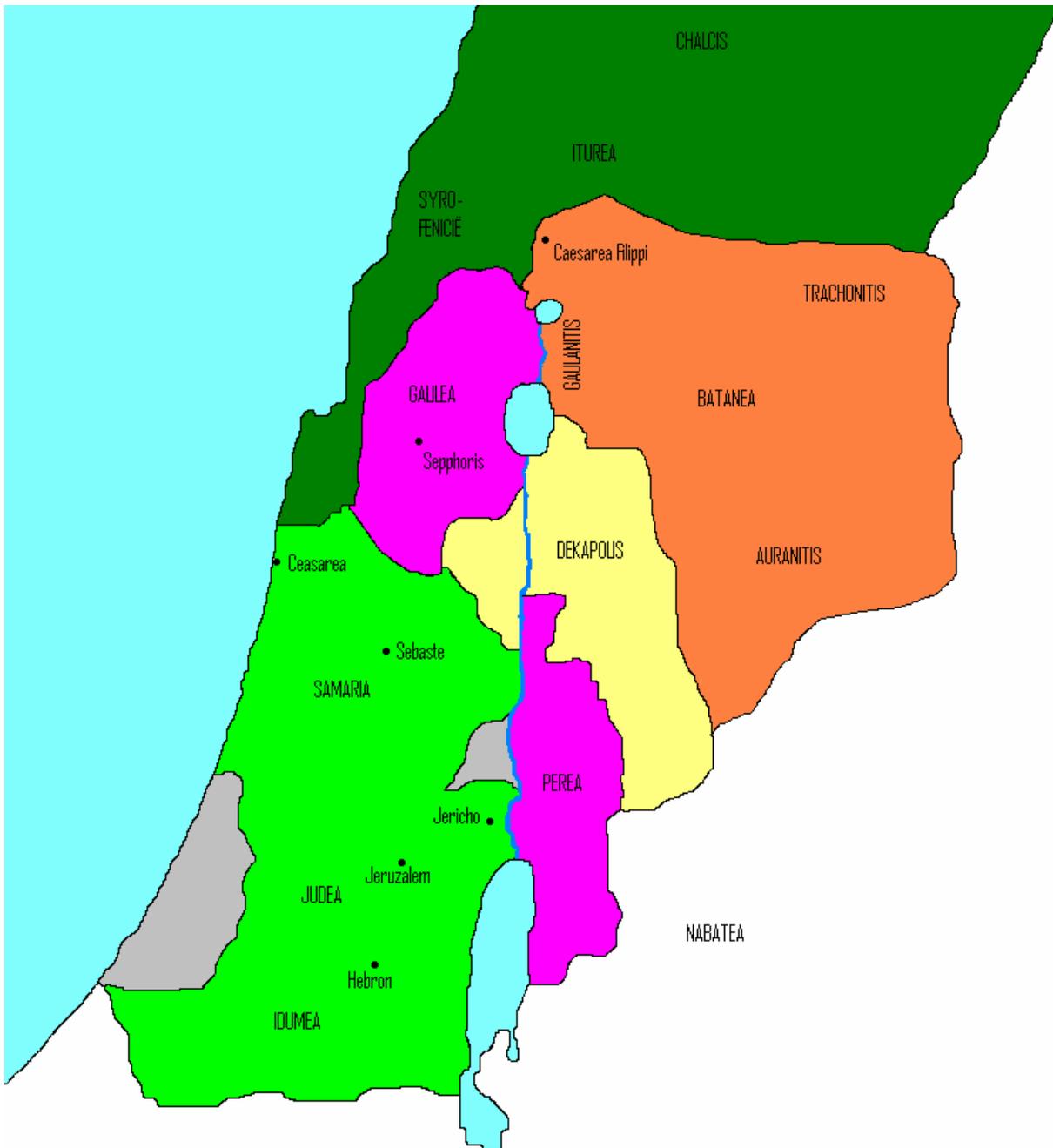
Archaeus – Continued Strife with the Jews

- When Archaeus returned from Rome, he wasted no time in punishing those who opposed him. He treated the Jews and Samaritans with great brutality. He also removed the High Priest from his position because he had directly aided the 50 men who went to Rome to oppose him.
- He married Glaphyra, the widow of his brother Alexander, though his wife and her second husband, Juba, king of Mauretania, were alive. This violation of the Mosaic law, along with his constant cruelty roused the ire of the Jews, who complained to Augustus.
- Because of poor performance and continued complaints, Archaeus was deposed in the year 6 and banished to Gaul; the area then came under direct Roman rule.

Archaeus in the Gospel of Matthew

- In Matthew 2:13-23, Joseph, Mary and Jesus fled to Egypt to avoid the Massacre of the Innocents. When Herod the Great died, Joseph was told by an angel in a dream to return to Israel (presumably to Bethlehem).

- However, upon hearing that Archaelus had succeeded his father as ruler of Judea he "was afraid to go thither" (Matthew 2:22), and was again notified in a dream to go to Galilee. This is Matthew's explanation of why Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea but grew up in Nazareth.



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Geographical Areas and Administrative Districts of Palestine Ruled by the Herods		
Southern	Northern	Northeastern
Samaria, Judea, Idumea	Gallilee and Perea	Iturea, Trachonitis, Gaulanitis, Auranitis, Batanea
Herod the Great, 37-4 BC		
Archaeus 4 BC - 6 AD	Antipas, 4 BC - 39 AD	Philip 4 BC - 34 AD
Roman Governors 6 - 41 AD		Roman Governors 34 - 37 AD
	Agrippa I 39 - 44 AD	Agrippa I 37 - 44 AD
Agrippa I, 41-44 AD		
Roman Governors 44 - 66 AD	Roman Governors 44 - 53 AD	Roman Governors 44 - 56 AD
	Agrippa II 53 - 66 AD	Agrippa II (53-56) & Governors (56-66)
Jewish Rebellion Against Rome (66-70 AD)		
Province of Palestine (70-135)		
Colonia Aelia Capitolina (After 135 AD)		
Dennis Bratcher, Copyright © CRI/Voice, Institute		

The Parable

- There are many parallels with the Parable of the Talents – The primary one is that in both there are three servants, each of whom receive money from their master to invest.
- Again, two servants invest their money and do well for their master
- Again, the one servant hides his money and does not gain an increase.

The Slothful Servant's Description of the Nobleman

- The man who hid his mina says that he feared the nobleman, saying he was both harsh (austere) and unjust (taking what he didn't lay down, etc).
- In the symbolism of the parable these characteristics would be applied to Jesus.
- God is strict and exacting (austere) in the way that He holds us accountable in the use of what He gives us.
- God is sovereign (taking what He didn't lay down). It does not matter what we think about it, that's still the way it is.
- Nowhere in the Scriptures do you ever find the servant telling the master what he can or cannot do, nor do you see the master asking the servant what he thinks. When it comes to God's plan and purpose, our opinions are irrelevant.

God Says What He Means, and He Means What He Says:

- We may want to twist and bend it

- The thoughts of men may be more appealing
False religion will try to convince us institutions and programs are more important.
- But the simple, immutable fact is that God intends to hold us accountable for every shred of truth we hear.
- If you're listening to it, but not doing anything with it, then you're like the disobedient servant, in the process of losing what little you have.

The parable is intended to teach the people that an interim is to occur between his first and second comings. The kingdom would not come in the form in which they expected it and pleaded for it.

- As Archaeus departed for Rome only to return, so the Son of Man will leave and eventually come back.
- Jesus endows his followers with talents and expects us to put them to work fruitfully.
- When Jesus returns, all will have to give an account for that which they have been entrusted. He will also punish those who oppose him.

Jesus was not intending to say that his rule would be like the rule of wicked Archaeus. Rather, the absence of Archaeus would in some ways parallel Jesus departure and eventual return. Until He returns, we are responsible for the growth and care of the kingdom.



Coins issued under the rule of Archelaus. Courtesy CNGCOINS.com; Permission granted under "GNU Free Documentation License".

Points to Ponder

The profits earned by the first two servants are incredible – 1,000 and 500 percent. What does this say about expectations for the “talents” which we have been given?

Which most closely parallels the money (mina) which the servants received in the parable – our talents (abilities) or the truth (gospel) which we have learned?

7) Duties in the Kingdom (1)

Parable of the Householder (Matt 13:52)

Here is another short parable from Matthew's "parable chapter". This chapter opens with Jesus preaching to the multitude at the Sea of Galilee from a boat. In addition to the parables themselves, this chapter contains details about why Jesus spoke in parables.

There are eight parables recorded in this chapter, which are designed to represent the kingdom of heaven, the method of planting the gospel kingdom in the world, and of its growth and success.

The parable is as follows: *"Therefore every scribe who has been made a disciple to the kingdom of heaven is like a man that is a householder, who brings forth out of his treasure things new and old."*

This parable is uttered after Jesus was immediately speaking parables about the end of the world. He asks his disciples (verse 51) if they understood the teachings on the kingdom which he had just completed – and they affirmed that they did indeed understand it.

- It is the will of Christ, that all those who read and hear the word should understand it; for otherwise how should live by it?
- When we have read or heard the word, we should ask ourselves if we have understood it; if not, we should seek out the meaning in study or by asking others.

The purpose of the parable itself was to give his commendation to the disciples for their understanding and willingness to learn.

- He commends them as scribes instructed in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus was instructing them so that they might instruct others – therefore, he had a vested interest in their proficiency.
- The teachers among the Jews were the scribes. Ezra, who prepared his heart to teach in Israel, is called a ready scribe, Ezra 7:6, 7:10.
- A skilful, faithful minister of the gospel is also a scribe, but more specifically, a "scribe instructed in the kingdom of heaven."
- Those who are to instruct others must first be taught. If our lips are to give forth knowledge, the knowledge must first reside in our head.

He compares the disciples to a good householder, who brings forth out of his treasure things new and old; fruits of last year's growth and this year's gathering, abundance and variety, for the entertainment of his friends. (See Song of Solomon 7:13)

Likewise, we should be able to bring out of our "storehouse of knowledge" things new and old, for the benefit of our families, friends, and fellow Christians.

- We should have a good understanding of both the Old and New Testaments.
- We should be able to apply the scriptures for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and instruction in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16-17)
- We should be able to apply old and new experiences and observations as wisdom

- We should not rest on our laurels. We cannot reach a point where we are satisfied with what we have learned – we must always be willing to add new knowledge and learning.
- We are to “lay up treasures” not for ourselves, but for the benefit of others.

The apostles were well versed in the Old Testament – but God was now speaking “new things” by his Son, Jesus. (Heb 1:1-2)

Jesus was pleased that his disciples were learning, and equipping themselves to teach others. They did not yet realize the extent of what they would be called to do – only Jesus knew what would lie in store for them. Jesus here praises the disciples for their willingness to learn – in many cases, we can see the disciples asking Jesus to explain his teachings. In the same way, we will be rewarded when we study and apply the Word of God.

Points to Ponder

Why is it important for us to study and know the Old Testament? (Read Rom 15:4)

In addition to knowledge, what other “fruits” can we set aside in our “storehouse” to be brought out for the benefit of others?

In addition to knowledge, what other “fruits” can we set aside in our “storehouse” to be brought out for the benefit of God?

Parable of the Soils (Sower) (Matt 13:1-9, 18-23; Mark 4:1-9, 13-20; Luke 8:4-8, 11-15)

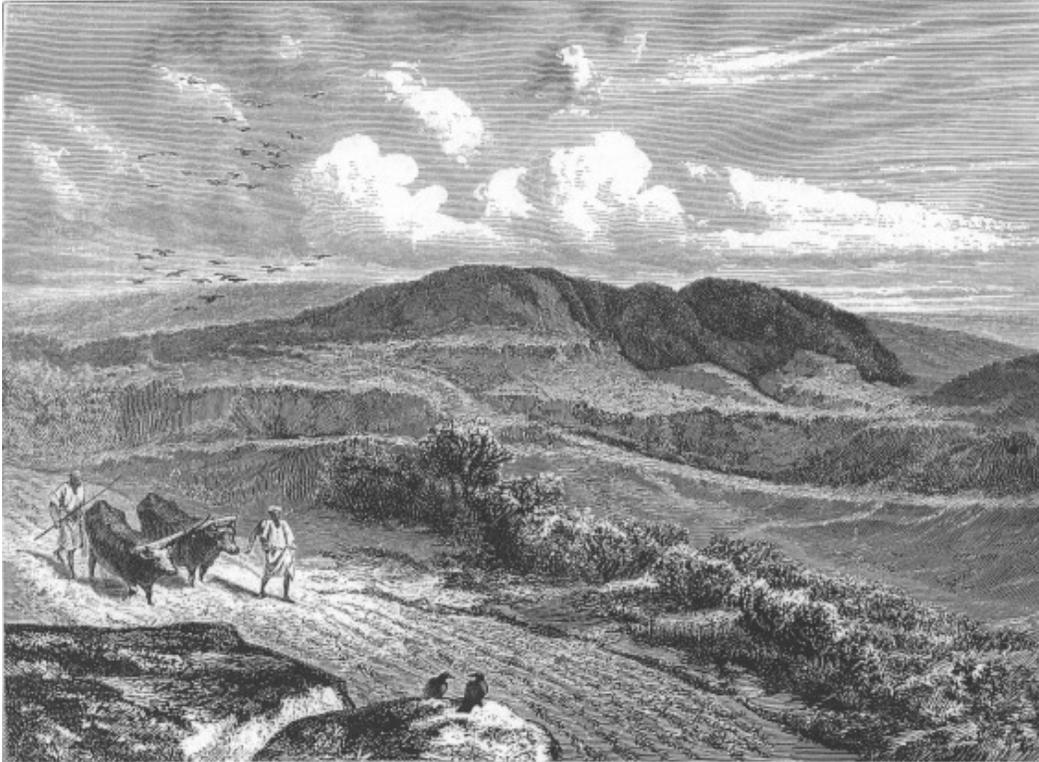
Jesus taught this parable speaking from a boat in the Sea of Galilee. The surface of the water deflected his voice; this natural system allowed the multitude to hear him plainly. We can imagine the crowd listening to Jesus while farmers were sowing fields in the background. Again, Jesus is speaking to the people in terms of something they saw on a regular basis, and which they readily understood – a farmer sowing his field. Many of his listeners were farmers, or had worked on a farm at some point in their lives.

Farming was much simpler in Jesus’ day. From the Old Testament (Jer 4:3; Isa 28:24-25) and other sources, we learn some key facts:

- The farmer would sow wheat or barley on the top of the soil
- The farmers would break the ground and bury the seed by plowing
- He would then wait for the winter rain to germinate the seeds

The farmer would carry the seed in a bag slung around his neck. He would then cast the seed by hand. Inevitably, not all the seed would fall on the land to be plowed. But the farmer did not worry about this – it was all part of his normal methods.

The area where Jesus taught the parable had been covered by dust from frequent eruptions of a volcanic range in the past. Where the dust had settled thickly, the land was very fertile. Other places were hard, rocky and barren. In a given field there could be a mix of fertile soil, rocky soil, and unplowable rock outcrops.



Alexander Bida, 1874. Copyright Expired.

An average yield in those days could be tenfold. If a farmer would yield 30 fold, he considered himself very fortunate. Sixty fold was virtually unheard of, and 100 fold very rare (Gen 26:12). The listeners would not have been surprised to hear about the seed that was lost – they were familiar with this. But hearing about a yield of 100 fold would make them stop and think about a key point of the parable – the abundant harvest to come.

It is helpful to look at the context of the parable. Let's do this using the Book of Matthew:

- Jesus healing ministry is described in chapters 8 and 9. Jesus looked on the crowds with compassion, comparing them to sheep without a shepherd. *"Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.'"*
- In chapter 10, Jesus sends out his disciples, warning them of persecution and death.
- Matthew depicts the same theme in the next two chapters. Jesus is described by his opponents as *"...a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and 'sinners.'"*
- In chapter 12, the Pharisees are plotting to kill Jesus, and he is accused of working his miracles by the power of Beelzebub.
- It is as if Jesus had been sowing on shallow ground, and his seed was not reaping a good crop. Yet, in spite of all this opposition, the large crowds showed that much seed was falling on fertile ground. This sets the stage for the parable of the sower.

Interpretation

The parable of the sower is one of the few parables where Jesus gives an explanation to his disciples. This explanation comes on the heels of Jesus being asked why he spoke to the people in parables. To this, he gives the reply, *"The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of*

heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables.” (Matt 13:11-13)

- Note that Jesus is asked why he speaks to the people in parables
- He says that the “knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom” was given to his disciples, but not to the people. (Matt 11:25)
- But these secrets were not to be hidden forever (Mark 4:22)

Mark provides the fullest account of Jesus’ interpretation of the parable. He includes a word of Rebuke from Jesus, “*Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?*” (4:13) This seems to indicate that Jesus felt his disciples should have understood this parable without asking.

The emphasis of the parable is not on the sower; it is on the seed, and what happens to the seed when it falls on different soils.

- In the same way, ministers, missionaries and all Christians face different results when we teach the gospel.
- There are hardened hearts and hostile responses
- There are brief successes – those who obey the gospel – only to quickly fall away
- The parable assures gospel preachers and workers in the Kingdom that success will come, despite the fact that some hearers reject the message of salvation.

Application

Seed Falling On the Path

- Note the emphasis on the word “heart”
- Like birds eating seed on the path before it is sown, the devil snatches the word away from men’s hearts so that it does not take root there.
- We would say, “In one ear and out the other”
- Some people are hearers only – but they never let the word take root in their lives.
- They ignore the summary of God’s law, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart” (Matt 22:37)

The Seed in Rocky and Shallow Soil

- In the spring rains, this seed grows rapidly. But when the summer comes, the shallow soil dries and the plants wither.
- Matthew and Mark bring out the concept of immediacy; the people hear the word “at once” with joy, then “quickly” fall away.
- Jesus speaks of a time of trouble, persecution and testing – when this comes, many fall away. They have second thoughts about their religion.
- When the time comes to take a stand and pay a price to be a Christian, many do not pass the test. Their faith was *superficial*.
- The righteous person, on the other hand, flourishes like a tree planted by a stream of water (Ps 1:3)
- Shallow persons lack courage, conviction, stability and perseverance. They are influenced by every wind of doctrine that blows their way.

The Seed Among Thorns

- This seed seems to have a better chance for growth and development.
- The soil in which they grow is fertile.

- But later, thorns and thistles come and overtake the wheat in height. They deprive them of moisture and light, choking them and stunting their growth.
- This well describes people who lead a “double life” – religious on Sunday and worldly the rest of the week. Soon, the ways of the world, its worries and charms overtake them.
- Man cannot serve two masters.
- We cannot have our security in riches and possessions. These must occupy a second place – otherwise, they will be first.

The Seed in Good Soil

- The three previous sketches of the field should not discourage God’s workers. Rather, we should take faith that those who respond to God’s word and grow to full ripeness will be an abundant harvest.
- Matthew says this person is “the one who hears the word and understands it”. We would say, it is the one who hears the word, accepts it, and applies it to his life.
- Our whole being – our will, our intellect, and our emotions – should be touched by the Word of God. A spiritual growth takes place, and then we bring forth a great harvest.

The Parable of Parables

- Some scholars have called this the “parable of parables” – as it contains four parables in one, which together provide a very detailed description of the kingdom and its growth.
- A universal truth is taught – the Word of God is proclaimed, but people respond to the Word differently.
- This is not the fault of the sower. We must not lose heart.
- In the end, there will be a great multitude that is saved. The work of the sower will be justified by the harvest.

Points to Ponder

Have you ever know of people who attended church for years and never obeyed the gospel? Why is accepting the gospel call so difficult for some?

What are things we should be doing to help new converts from being “choked out” by the world?

Based on your experiences, what percentage of converts can be characterized by each type of soil?

Is it the responsibility of those who sow to help converts to become “good soil”? Can this be done? If so, how?

Should ones intellect or emotions take the lead role in his or her conversion? Why?

Parable of the Great Feast (Luke 14:7-14)

Jesus is eating in the home of a prominent Pharisee. While there, one of the guests states, “Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.” The speaker was fishing for a compliment, hoping that Jesus would verify that he would indeed eat at this feast. Instead of praising the man, Jesus tests him by teaching this parable.

The Story

A man was preparing for a banquet – this well-to-do man invited many people, who accepted his request. When the day came, the host sent his servant to tell them to come (Esther 6:14).

One by one, they all began to make excuses:

1. The first said he had just bought a field, and the new business venture was requiring his attention. He was putting business ahead of pleasure and his prior obligations.
2. The second was also in the midst of a business deal, having just bought a five pairs of oxen, and he was on his way to try them out. The oxen drivers were lined up – to leave now would be irresponsible.
3. The third guest announced that he had just gotten married. As such, he was in the midst of his own marriage festivities, with responsibilities toward his guests.

The host was angry. Food had been purchased and prepared; many preparations had been put in place. He could not let this go to waste. He had no choice but to fill his house with other guests. He ordered his servants to go into the streets and alleys and fill the house with the crippled, the poor, the blind, and the lame. Still, there was more room. So the master reached out to the outcasts of society. The servant went out of town, to the country side, to invite all who could be found.

Interpretation

Jesus teaches this parable to inspire us to not allow the cares and concerns of the world to come before God. If we are not careful, we can find ourselves making excuses as to why we are not honoring our obligations. We have made a promise to love God with all of our heart, soul and mind. But this promise readily becomes hollow when the interests of this life consume out undivided attention.

The excuses offered by the guests do not stand the test:

- The field would still be there for inspection the following day – and should be inspected before purchase, not afterward.
- The oxen could rest until the next day for evaluation – and again should have been tested before buying, not afterward.
- Newlyweds should make allowances for an occasional separation.
- Most of all, after making commitments to come to the wedding, allowances should have been made by the invited guests. If the invitation was to be declined, this should have happened after the initial invitation. Instead, the invited guests show a lack of respect to the master of the banquet by scheduling events that conflicted with their commitment.

Jesus is making a point – he is using as examples excuses that are insufficient and flimsy. Furthermore, to refuse an invite that was previously accepted was an outright insult to the host – to such a degree that among Arab tribes it was the equivalent of an outright declaration of war.

The parable was addressed to all who listened:

- Jesus is telling the listeners that the feast is ready – now is the time to come.
- But the religious establishment of Jesus' day was not ready to accept the coming of the kingdom; but common people accepted it eagerly (Mark 12:37).

- Jesus intimated that the kingdom would not lack citizens. If Israel rejected God's invitation, he would extend the kingdom to social outcasts – tax collectors, prostitutes, and the Gentiles.

Application

The attitude of the invited guests is intended to reflect that of the religious hierarchy of the day.

Jesus involves himself in the conclusion, when he states "I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet."

- Jesus is the central figure – the host.
- It is not to be understood that people are free to accept or decline his invitation at will – the call to the banquet is the equivalent of a command that expects compliance.
- The man who eats in the kingdom of God is blessed because he obeys the laws of the kingdom and fulfills the commands of the king.

The Lesson Of The Parable Is Clear:

- Jesus is sending his servants forth with the message that the kingdom has come.
- Those who hear the message are invited to share in the blessings of the kingdom.
- We are to go out and invite all who are willing to share in the feast.

Jews and Gentiles

- Jesus had earlier noted that Jews who had been invited but refused to come would be denied a place at the dinner table. Instead, "People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God." (Luke 13:29)
- Paul adhered to the rule, "First to the Jew, then to the Gentile" (Rom 1:16)
- Jesus first sent his apostles to the Jews, "These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel." (Matt 10:5-6)
- Paul and Barnabus brought the gospel to the Jews in Pisidian Antioch, but when those people rejected the offer of salvation, the apostles turned to the Gentiles. (Acts 13:46)

Points to Ponder

We live in an age when many people who belong to the church offer flimsy excuses for non-participation in the work of the kingdom. But God's faithful servants must go out in the world with an invitation to come to Jesus Christ.

Accepting the invitation requires faith on part of the guests. When the servant invited the guests, they saw only a man, not the host. When we proclaim the message of salvation, many people will see only a person. It takes faith to see beyond the person the Savior Jesus Christ, who offers salvation full and free. How do we help people to see beyond the messenger, to the message?

What are the excuses that most people offer when they refuse the invitation to join the feast in the kingdom? How can we help overcome these excuses? Or, is it our duty to only give the invitation?

Parable of the Barren Fig Tree (Luke 13:6-9)

According to the Law of Moses, when a tree was planted, the owner had to wait three years before the fruit of the tree was considered clean, and could be eaten: *“When you enter the land and plant any kind of fruit tree, regard its fruit as forbidden. For three years you are to consider it forbidden; it must not be eaten.”* (Lev 19:23).

In the parable, the land owner was patient for three additional years – but every year, the tree was barren. He sought to cut down the tree to make room for another. He had finally lost his patience with this investment.

But the man who took care of the vineyard pleaded for patience. He wanted to dig up the ground around the tree, to allow the rain to seep in, and he wanted to fertilize the tree. Before giving up on the years he had invested in the tree, he wanted to do all he could to get it to bring forth a good crop for his owner.



Large Fig Tree. Mike Bogle, Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike 2.5 License

The Fig Tree in the Lives of the Israelites

The fig tree played a dominant role in the lives of many Israelites. God even used the fig tree to indicate Israel's prosperity – with everyone living under his own vine and fig tree. Let's look at some passages from the Old Testament:

- *“During Solomon's lifetime Judah and Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, lived in safety, each man under his own vine and fig tree.”* (1 Kings 4:25)
- *“Every man will sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid, for the LORD Almighty has spoken.”* (Micah 4:4)
- *“I will take away their harvest, declares the LORD. There will be no grapes on the vine. There will be no figs on the tree, and their leaves will wither. What I have given them will be taken from them.”* (Jer 8:13)
- *“When I found Israel, it was like finding grapes in the desert; when I saw your fathers, it was like seeing the early fruit on the fig tree. But when they came to Baal Peor, they consecrated themselves to that shameful idol and became as vile as the thing they loved.”* (Hosea 9:10)
- *“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no*

cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.” (Hab 3:17-18)

- *“They will devour your harvests and food, devour your sons and daughters; they will devour your flocks and herds, devour your vines and fig trees. With the sword they will destroy the fortified cities in which you trust.” (Jer 5:17)*
- *“I will ruin her vines and her fig trees, which she said were her pay from her lovers; I will make them a thicket, and wild animals will devour them.” (Hosea 2:12)*

Interpretation

When God was displeased with Israel, he would make it known by describing the nation as a fig tree that would not bear fruit. Like the fig tree in the parable, Israel had received a choice spot in the vineyard, and extra care. But Israel did not match privilege with duty. God was displeased with her lack of fruit.

The parable shows an implied contrast. If the man who was in charge of the vineyard lavished special care on the fig tree for an extra year, how much more consideration will God shower on man, and certainly on his own people. God is long suffering – yet he is also described as jealous, and as a consuming fire.

The point of the story is that God has a limit to his patience. God’s mercy is great, but in the end judgment will come. The time of grace that God grants to sinners must be used to repent and turn to him.

Context

The parable is told in the historical context of Herod’s mixing the blood of some Galileans with their sacrifices, as we read in Luke 13:1-5. *“Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”*

Jesus confirms that these Galileans, along with people killed during the falling of a tower in Siloam, were not singled out for special punishment from God. Perhaps he had been asked a question in regard to this. But Jesus teaches that all men will repent if they do not perish. God is no respecter of persons (Acts 10:34). He calls for every one of us to come to repentance.

God’s patience will end for every man who does not repent. *“We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.” (Heb 2:1-4)*

Retrospect

The point of the parable is that when the allotted time for repentance is expired, God's judgment is finalized. Whether it is a fig tree, or men, the time will come when they will either be kept or rooted out. The time we have now is a period of grace – we must take advantage of it.

There is no ending to the parable – we are not told if the master has the tree cut down, or if the servant is successful in gaining another year for the tree. In the same way, we do not know how much time we have – we must obey the Gospel while we can. Tomorrow may be too late.

Points to Ponder

On one hand, we are often told to pray, "Lord come quickly". On the other hand, it seems right for us to plea for more time to bring people to repentance. After all, our heart's desire should be for men to be saved (Rom 10:1). Should we pray for Jesus to come, or pray for God to tarry his judgment?

There is a very similar parable/story in Isaiah 5:1-7. In this parable, choice vines are planted, yet despite much tending and care, they do not yield good grapes. The whole vineyard is destroyed and turned into a wasteland.

The parable may be seen symbolically fulfilled in Jesus cursing the fig tree (matt 21:18; Mark 11:12-14). It is interesting that only Matthew and Mark report the cursing of the fig tree, and only Luke records the parable of the barren fig tree.

8) Duties in the Kingdom (2)

Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14)



M. Bihn & J. Bealings, 1922, copyright expired.

It is common to point out the Pharisee in this parable, and point to him as an example of the attitude of all Pharisees. However, care must be taken. While many Pharisees displayed a self-righteous attitude and looked down upon others, there were some good Pharisees. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea are two such examples. Perhaps for this reason, Luke provides an introduction, *“To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable.”*

The Pharisee

Jesus here depicts the actions of a particular Pharisee who in his own eyes surpassed his countrymen in observance of the Mosaic Law.

- He is filled with a spirit of self-righteousness
- In his own words and general conduct, he shows that he does not need God because of his trust in himself
- His self-confidence is great – he knows he can live up to his own standards (which are more important in his eyes than those of God).
- He disdains the person who is unable to live up to this standard.

He goes to the temple to pray – likely at 9 am or 3 pm, the designated hours for prayer. He goes to the outer court, in order to be seen by the most men. Here he stands, looks up to heaven, and offers a self-centered prayer about himself.

- The pronoun “I” occurs four times.
- It is a prayer of thanks giving. No petition is offered, for he trusts in himself and own sufficiency.
- There is no confession, for he has kept the outward commandments.
- References to his fellow man are listed in negative terms. He makes himself feel better by tearing down others around him.

The Pharisee proudly points out two extras that he has done:

- First, he fasts twice a week, over and above the commandments of the Law. The law prescribed fasting one day per year, the tenth day of the 7th month, on the “Day of Atonement” (Lev 23:27-32) The Pharisees had instituted Monday and Thursday as days of fasting, during which prayer was to be offered for the entire nation.
- Second, although he produce he buys has already been tithed by the grower, the Pharisee makes sure that everything that becomes his is again tithed.

The prayer of the Pharisee may seem like an exaggeration by Jesus; but a similar prayer has been recorded in the Talmud (a record of rabbinic discussions pertaining to Jewish law, ethics, customs, and history) in about AD 70. This prayer was originally uttered by Rabbi Nedhunya ben Ha Kana:

“I give thanks to Thee, O Lord my God, that Thou hast set my portion with those who sit in the Beth ha Midrash [house of learning] and Thou hast not set my portion with those who sit in [street] corners, for I rise early and they rise early, but I rise for the words of the Torah and they rise early for frivolous talk; I labor and they labor, but I labor and receive a reward; and they labor and do not receive a reward; I run and they run, but I run to the life of the future world and they run to a pit of destruction.” (*Berakoth 28, Zeraim, The Balyonian Talmud, p. 172.*)

The Pharisee notices a tax collector. He is free from the sins committed by this traitor. How does he dare come into the temple area? Does not David ask, “*Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false.*” (Psalms 24:3-4)

The Tax Collector

The tax collector does not dare to enter the synagogue. As a Jew, even though outcast, he has access to the outer courts of the temple. He needs only a place, away from others, to lift up his penitent prayer.

- The Word of God has convicted him of his sin.
- He does not dare look to heaven or lift his hands in prayer (I Tim 2:8)
- He is ashamed of the sin he has committed against God and his fellow countrymen.

Because of his occupation, he has likely neglected his worship for many years. Now, he comes to confess his sin before God. The burden of sin is pressing him down; he cries out, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” He beats his breast, showing the source of his sin – his heart.

- The sinner comes to God with empty hands and heart.
- He has no merits and no claims.
- Excuses and explanations do not enter his mind.
- Comparisons are out of the question.
- He knows that is the sinner. He pleads for mercy.

Answers

Jesus reveals the answer that God provides to each man who prays, when he says, “I tell you that this man [the tax collector] rather than the other [the Pharisee] went home justified before God.

The people around the Pharisee would have considered him a holy and righteous person, due to his outward acts. The Pharisees even dressed the part. *“Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries[a] wide and the tassels on their garments long; 6they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues”* (Matt 23:5-6).

On the other hand, nearly everyone looked down on tax collectors. They were considered traitors, who sided with the Romans and enabled them to rule over the Jews through taxation.

But God hears the prayers and looks at the hearts of the two men.

- Once came as a saint, but went home a sinner.
- One came a sinner, and went home as a saint.
- *“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”* (Luke 14:11)

Application

“Pharisees” and “Publicans” are present in the church today.

In fact, there are aspects of all of our lives that mirror the actions and attitudes of these two men.

Jesus teaches that true humility leads to exaltation. We are to look only to him for salvation – not boasting of ourselves. When we are fully aware of our own sin, it is then that we will be drawn to approach God and ask for mercy, that he can save us through his Son.

Paul had the attitude right. In I Tim 1:15, he says, *“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.”*

Points to Ponder

What aspects of the Pharisee do you sometimes see in the attitudes of other Christians?

What aspects of the Pharisee do you sometimes see in publicly offered prayers?

What aspects of the Pharisee do you sometimes see in your own life?

How can we develop an attitude more like the tax collector in this parable, in our own relationship with God?

Some argue that wearing suits or dresses to church could put us “on a pedestal” such that we do not relate well to those of modest or “blue collar” means. Others argue that not wearing our best shows disrespect to God. Which position best reflects your opinion? Is there an element of truth to both? How do we resolve this issue?

Why is it important that the minister not wear robes or special clothing when addressing the congregation?

Parable of the Two Sons (Matt 21:28-32)

The Setting

Matthew's gospel places this parable immediately following the incident of the chief priests and elders questioning Jesus' authority. Jesus had already incurred their indignation, with his triumphal entry into Jerusalem (vs. 1-11), and then his overturning the tables in the temple (vs. 12-13).

Now, upon seeing Jesus doing miracles, they tested him by asking him by what authority he was operating. Jesus in turn asked them whether the baptism of John was from heaven, or from men. They refused to answer, knowing *"If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'From men'—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We don't know." Then he said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."* (vs. 25-27)

Jesus continues the thought with a story of a father and two sons. All the members of the family worked in the vineyard on a communal basis. The father asked the first son to go work; he answered "I will not." He did not address his father as sir, or even bother to give an apology or reason why he could not go. His answer was disrespectful and indignant.

The father asked his second son the same request. The son, in polite fashion, answered his father, "I will, sir." But this was a promise he did not intend to honor.

But the second son did not go to the vineyard that day. Instead, the first son, having a change of heart, entered the vineyard and worked as his father had requested.

Interpretation

The inevitable question is, "Who was the obedient son?" The answer is obvious. Jesus puts the question directly to the audience. The chief priests and elders of the people can no longer hide behind feigned ignorance. They are forced to answer, even though they realize the parable is speaking about the religious hierarchy of Israel.

The first son, Jesus says, is the personification of the tax collectors, prostitutes and other sinners who are living a sinful life and refusing to do the will of God. But when John the Baptist came "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4) the social and moral outcasts of society repented, believed, and began doing the will of God.

They had the attitude of Zacchaeus, the tax collector, who said, *"Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."* Jesus then said, *"Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."* (See Luke 19:1-10)

The second son portrays the religious leaders of the day. They are the ones who do everything for men to see. (Matt 23:5-7). They are the ones who do not practice what they preach. They did not listen to the words of John the Baptist. Neither were they persuaded by the miracles and teachings of Jesus. They saw and ignored; they listened, but did not hear. They rejected God's purpose and refused to be baptized (Luke 7:30).

The religious leaders, who were experts in the law, could put on an impressive show of outward compliance. Yet, while following the law to the letter, they violated the very spirit of the law. Jesus said it best in Matt 23:26-28; *“Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.”*

Summary

In this parable, Jesus speaks to those who believed they were without sin. The nonbelievers, the tax collectors and prostitutes, were accepting the message taught by John the Baptist and were repenting. But the believers were still continuing in their sins. This lesson teaches the value of actions and repentance over stated beliefs.

In one fell swoop, Jesus sums up the teachings of the Old and New Testaments – obey the word of God, heed his voice, and do his will. As Samuel told Saul, “To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.” (1 Samuel 15:22)

This simple parable is marked by simplicity, and can be summarized in the familiar words of James 1:22, *“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”*

Points to Ponder

What are examples of people today behaving like the Pharisees?

- People who act religious, coming to church on Sundays, and then acting differently the rest of the week.
- Putting on an outward show, but not having a true relationship with God. “Talking the talk, but not walking the walk.”
- Religious leaders who engage in back stabbing, sowing discord, and other sinful behaviors.
- Acting differently among worldly friends than we do with our fellow Christians.
- Gossiping.
- Looking down on others due to social status, or other reasons.
- What other examples can you think of?

Why was it so difficult for the religious leaders to accept Jesus? What warnings can we take from this understanding and apply to our own lives?

Parable of the Tenants (Matt 21:33-45)

Jesus told this parable during the last week of his earthly life. It is recorded that those around Jesus understood the story, for they said, “May this never be.” (Luke 20:16) Moreover, the gospels report that the Pharisees, chief priests, and teachers of the Law knew that this parable was directed against them.

A landowner had a plot of ground, in which he planted grapes. It was then necessary to erect walls and a watchtower to protect against thieves and animals. (Song of Sol 2:15; Ps 80:12-13). He also equipped it with a winepress – all in all, a significant investment.

Workers often tended absentee estates. If the owner had no heirs the workers would have the first right to the land. Generally, it would take four years for the vines to bear significant grapes – perhaps in the fifth year a profit could be gained, and the land owner could begin recouping his investment. During this time, the tenants would cultivate, prune the branches, fertilize, water, and take care of the property. They would often raise vegetables between the vines in the developing years. They worked as sharecroppers – entitled to a portion of the produce. But during the first four years, some financial support would be required from the land owner.

The description of the vineyard is from Isaiah 5:1-7.

- Using a vineyard as a metaphor to describe Israel was a common practice for religious discourse at the time. It could also be God's covenant, or perhaps the world itself.
- The produce made at the vineyard might be a metaphor for all the good works produced by the people. The produce of the vineyard is also sometimes used as a metaphor for the people themselves.

The reason for the animosity between the owner and the tenants is not shared. But the first servant is beaten and bruised, and returns back to tell his master of his less-than-welcome reception. It is clear the tenants have no intention of paying the requested income from the harvest.

The owner then sends out additional servants. Perhaps one came with a copy of the contract, stating clearly their obligations. Again, the poor servants are beaten and some killed by the wicked husbandmen.

The owner shows remarkable patience with the tenants. Finally, he decides to send his son, telling himself that surely they would listen to him, for he carried the authority of the family with him. Servants do not engender the respect of a son.

The tenants see the son approaching from afar. They may have thought that the owner died, with the son taking his place. In the legal setting of the time, if they then killed this only son, and the father was dead, they would get exclusive ownership of the land. They admit the son the the vineyard, then they cast him out and kill him outside of the vineyard. (This is sometimes thought of as a prophetic vision of Jesus being killed outside of Jerusalem at Golgotha – Heb 13:12).

The landowner's patience then ran out completely. They had killed his only son. Forces to eject the tenants and bring them to justice were initiated. The owner resumes possession of what is rightfully his, and appoints others to take over the stewardship of his property.

Meaning

- The owner of the vineyard is God.
- The son is Jesus.
- A common interpretation of the servants is that of the Jewish prophets, although they could be all of God's preceding messengers.

The parable is usually interpreted as saying that:

- God (the owner), kept sending prophets (servants) to collect what is due, the grapes, a symbol of good.
- The priests (leaseholders) however refuse to comply with the prophets and instead hurt each one worse than they did the previous, wanting ever more control of Israel (the vineyard) for themselves.
- But when they finally kill the son, God (the owner) will revoke their right to Israel (the vineyard), and give it the followers of Jesus (the others) instead.

The religious leaders knew that this applied to them:

- Some of the prophets were killed because of the message they brought.
- Zechariah was murdered between the temple and the altar (2 Chr 24:20-12; Matt 23:35)
- Jeremiah was beaten and put into stocks at the Upper Gate of Benjamin (Jer 20:1-2)
- John the Baptist was rejected by the Jewish Leaders and ultimately killed by Herod Antipas.

Jesus skillfully asked the audience, "...when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" His words were directed against the leaders of the people. They had rejected the prophets, and rejected John the Baptist, and now they were rejecting Jesus, questioning his authority and openly defying him. In effect, they rejected God's final messenger.

Jesus then appealed to psalms 118:22-23, a passage that would be known to all the worshippers who had come to Jerusalem. This psalm was sung every year as part of the feast ceremonies. *"The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes."*

Jesus shifts the attention from the tenants who rejected the servant, to the builders who rejected the stone. Thus, he implied clearly that he was the personification of the vineyard owner's son, and the stone rejected by the builders. He thus spoke of his imminent death and impending exultation. This would be considered blasphemous by the religious leaders, who would recognize that Jesus, in calling himself the capstone, was openly stating that he was the Messiah.

The purpose of the sacrifice of the son's life becomes evident when Jesus steers the discussion to the capstone imagery. "Vineyard" and "Building stone" were both metaphors that would be readily understood by the Jews. The religious leaders recognized the threat that Jesus stated – they would be crushed by the very building stone which they had rejected.

Application

We can apply this parable to our own lives today. Jesus teaches that seemingly endless patience is granted by God toward those who oppose him, or those who do not accept him. But this patience ends at the rejection of his son. "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." (John 14:6)

The Rejected Stone Becomes the Corner Stone

- The Lord Jesus will be exalted to the Father's right hand.
- He has all judgment and all power committed to him; he is the corner-stone and top-stone of the church, and, if so, his enemies can expect no other than to be destroyed.

- Those that slight him, that stumble at him, and are offended in him, shall be broken.
- But to those who hate and persecute him, as the Jews did, he will fall upon them and crush them to pieces - will grind them to powder.

Points to Ponder

There may be a direct historical reference by Jesus to Sennacherib, king of Assyria, some 700 years previous. Sennacherib conquered Babylon at the time that Hezekiah was king of Judah, and set up several rulers over the city, all of whom were overthrown. Finally, he sent his son and heir apparent Assur-nadin-sumi to rule, but after a short time, he was also killed. Finally, Sennacherib himself went to Babylon and destroyed the city stone by stone, and placed a curse on it that it should not be rebuilt for seventy years.

Is it possible to gain assurance and confidence from this parable, in addition to warning and fear?

From the comments about the rejected stone – can we assume that the condemnation of spiteful persecutors will be much sorer than that of careless unbelievers?

Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:16-21)

“Do not judge, or you too will be judged”, Jesus warned in his Sermon on the Mount. (Matt 7:1) In the context of this parable, he was asked to be a judge in an internal dispute over an inheritance. The father had died, and the younger brother did not feel that he was given a proper share by his older brother, in accordance with Jewish law.

He appealed to Jesus as “Teacher”, because he saw him in the traditional role of a Rabbi. The Jews would often appeal to a Rabbi to judge inheritance cases, appealing to Old Testament scriptures such as these for precedence:

- Numbers 27:1-7 – Moses allowed inheritance to be passed to the daughters of Zelophehad, who had no sons.
- Numbers 36:2-10 – Moses further rules that the daughters must marry inside the tribe of Manasseh to prevent the inheritance from passing from tribe to tribe
- Deut 21:15-17 – A man must give the “double share” inheritance due to his first son, even if he loves another son more, or if he loves the mother of the younger son more.

Jesus, however, refused to be pulled into this quarrel and rule as a judge and arbiter. He refused to be used by someone who was acting out of selfish motives. The man who approached Jesus failed to see him as a teacher. He saw him as a Rabbi, who acted in the dual role of teacher and lawyer. This was a major problem because it threatened his spiritual inheritance, his eternal destiny.

The writer does not say whether the man was right or wrong in his legal case. But Jesus, who by divine power would know the facts and the man’s heart, gives us a clue when he says, *“Watch Out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”*

- This seems to indicate that the man was acting out of greed. Perhaps the younger son was not satisfied with the Law, which stated that the oldest son received a double share. Or, perhaps he felt that the shares were not divided evenly and fairly.
- Greed is idolatry. It is the worship of other things instead of the creator.
- Greedy people will not inherit the kingdom of God.
- *“For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.”* (1 Tim 6:7-8)

Birthrights

When Jacob asked Esau to sell him his birthright (Gen. 25:31), he was looking to obtain a position that had both legal and spiritual benefits.

In Bible times, the firstborn son enjoyed a favored position, which was his by right of birth (hence birthright). He was privileged to inherit a double portion of his father's assets (Deut. 21:17) and could expect to receive a special blessing before the father died. After his father's death, a firstborn son became the head of the family, carrying on the family name.

The inheritance rights of the firstborn were protected by law; a father could not give his benefits to a younger son (Deut. 21:15–17). However, the firstborn himself could lose, forfeit, or sell his birthright. Jacob's son Reuben lost his favored position because he committed incest with his father's concubine (Gen. 35:22; 1 Chr. 5:1–2).

Likewise, Esau sold his birthright for a stew of lentils (Gen. 25:29–34), or “one morsel of food” (Heb. 12:16). In doing so, Esau committed a grave sin. It was bad enough to squander his inheritance for a single meal. Far worse, he was throwing away the blessing of God, who he knew had promised to make a great nation of Abraham (Gen. 22:15–18). In this way, Esau serves as an example to believers today to hold on to what God has promised.

The Parable

The parable of the rich fool points out that true wealth does not consist of earthly riches. Wealth does not bring happiness. Often, it is the source of ruin and destruction. There are many happy, poor people in the world – and many rich, miserable people as well.

Note how often he refers to himself:

"The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store **my** crops.' Then he said, 'This is what **I'll** do. **I** will tear down **my** barns and build bigger ones, and there **I** will store all **my** grain and **my** goods. And **I'll** say to **myself**, **you** have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry'."

By using the words “I” and “my” repeatedly, he shows his utter selfishness. God had promised to fill his barns with plenty, if he would honor him with the first fruits of the harvest. But this man had no regard for God's promise. In fact, he showed contempt for God, not trusting in his promises, by tearing down his barns and building bigger ones.

- He wanted to be in control – instead of allowing God to be in control.
- There was no trust and dependence on God.
- Helping the poor never entered his mind.
- He thought only of his own ease, pleasure and security.

- God and neighbor did not exist for him – he thought only of himself.
- He did not thank God for the riches he received.

This brings to mind James 4:13-17, *“Now listen, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.’ Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.’ As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins.”*

God turns the situation around – see how God turns his “I’s” and “me’s” into “you’s”.

“You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?”

God calls him to give an account for his wealth – and he falls woefully short.

- His earthly accounts were overflowing – but his spiritual bank account was overdrawn.
- When god called him, the accounts were frozen, and could not be altered.
- He was rich toward himself, but not toward God.

“Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?” This question is rhetorical – and shows that all of our riches in effect belong to God. When we leave this world, we cannot take them with us (1 Tim 6:7). He gives and takes in the appointed time.

Conclusion

Jesus did not say that man should shun earthy riches, pleasure, and ease. Nor did he tell the younger brother who approached him to totally disregard material goods. The message is a message on greed.

God has placed us here as stewards. As such, we must give an account to God of his accounts. He has trusted us with money, as well as with talents and abilities, all of which should be put to use in God’s kingdom.

If we live only for ourselves, we are spiritually dead.

Jesus concludes his parable with an admonition to store up treasure in heaven and to be rich toward God. As Jesus taught in Matt 6:21, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Points to Ponder

It is sad when brothers and sisters turn on each other and sever ties due to disagreements over inheritances. One method has been proposed to resolve such issues. Suppose there are three siblings. The oldest divides the inheritance into three lots – but the other two get to pick first. The one who divides picks last, thus insuring equal division of the property, and eliminating arguments over the split. What do you think of this idea?

Do you believe the man who approached Jesus was acting selfishly?

Some have taught that putting money in a bank, or saving money in a 401K or retirement fund, is wrong because we are “putting our trust in riches”. How would you answer this?

Others argue that investing in the stock market is gambling, due to the speculative nature of stocks. What do you think?

What is our perspective on the inheritance coming to us in this world? Will it be a blessing and a resource to be managed responsibly before God? Or, like this man and the man in the parable, are we trying to fashion a life out of the abundance of our possessions?

9) Duties in the Kingdom (3)

Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matt 18:23-45)

The Context

How many times must we forgive our neighbor? This was the question of the day, asked by Peter. The question was one that was often debated by the scholars of the Law.

Peter thought he should go as much as seven times.

- This, he must have thought, would be sufficient to impress Jesus with Peter's desire to forgive a repeat "offender".
- But instead of praising Peter for agreeing to forgive up to seven times, Jesus says that we should forgive 77 times!
- Jesus multiplies the numbers seven and 10 – two numbers that signified "completeness" to the Jews – and adds another seven.
- Thus, he conveys the idea of infinity – our desire to forgive as Christians should be without end, just as there is no limit to God's mercy, from which we have benefited.

It is in the context of the "forgiveness question" that the Parable of the Unmerciful Steward should be interpreted. Jesus uses this parable to explain the magnitude of God's unforgiving love that must be reflected in God's people.

The Parable

A king called his servants together to give account for the money he had placed under their control (a common theme among many parables). One man, who evidently had been the beneficiary of the highest trust of the king, owed the king the astonishing sum of 10,000 talents. This is the equivalent of millions and millions of dollars in our currency. Many people place the value of a talent at around \$10,000.

A talent refers to a talent-weight of gold or of silver.

- The gold talent is reported as weighing roughly the same as a person, and so perhaps 60 kg (132 lb). Some authorities state more precisely, that the talent typically weighed about 33 kg (75 lb) varying from 20 to 40 kg.
- It is difficult to estimate the value of a talent in modern values. One way is from today's price of metals and in this case a 26 kg silver talent would be worth about \$11,500, and a talent of gold \$800,000.
- Another and probably better way is from wages. During the Peloponnesian war in Ancient Greece, a talent was the amount of silver needed to pay the crew of a trireme ship (about 200 men) for one month.

We should not get concerned over trying to calculate the exact monetary amount in the parable. The intent is not to convey an exact amount, but to convey an amount so large that it signified something beyond the means of any listener. For all practical purposes, it is an infinite amount of money, which no man could ever hope to regain and repay once lost.

Clearly, the man owed his master an enormous sum. And he could not repay it. Note that the man cried out for mercy, not remission. He promised to repay the money – but in reality, he knew there was no way for him to pay the debt back in full.

In response, the master gave him what he least expected – acquittal. His master took mercy on him, cancelled the debt, and let him go.

But when the tables are turned, and the minister of finance finds another man who owes him money, he does not act in the same way.

- This time the debts is much smaller – 100 denarii – a few days work. This could be readily repaid.
- The man who owes the money asks only for a short period of time.
- But the finance minister grabs him by the throat, demands immediate payment, then throws the man into prison until the debt is repaid.

But palace secrets are hard to keep. Word gets out to the King of what his finance minister had done. He is angry, and rebukes his servant. He then turns him over to the jailors to be tortured until all his debts are paid.

The Lesson

This story, told in colorful detail, accentuates the contrast between God's infinite love and mercy and man's stingy behavior that he attempts to justify on the basis of law.

- Man's sin is so great that God must forgive him infinitely
- The depth of God's mercy cannot be measured.

Justice and Mercy

- The word justice is not found in the parable – but the concepts of justice and mercy are clearly portrayed
- These Biblical concepts appear repeatedly in the Old Testament, particularly in the Psalms and Proverbs
- An example of mercy can be found in Ex 22:25-27, in regard to lending. Note that God says, "When he cries out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate."
- An example of Justice can be found in teachings about the year of Jubilee, in which land belonging to the dispersed was returned to the original owner. And even people sold into slavery were set free. (Lev 25)
- Mercy is not the occasional setting aside of justice. Too often we perceive justice as the norm that must be applied rigorously, and mercy as the occasional abandonment of that norm. We exercise this option as a "right" and frequently are commended for showing leniency. We know the concept well, "throwing ourselves to the mercy of the court."
- In our society, we have sometimes stressed mercy at the expense of justice. Coddling the criminal has been practiced to the extent that sometimes the rights of the offenders seem to outweigh the rights of those they have offended.
- But Jesus taught that justice and mercy are interrelated. They cannot be treated separately. Both are to be regarded as equal norms.

This parable, along with the parable of the Good Samaritan, epitomizes the "Golden Rule".

- Within Christian circles, the ethic of reciprocity is often called the "Golden Rule".
- Christianity adopted the ethic from two edicts, found in Leviticus 19:18 (*"Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself."*)

I am the LORD.") and Leviticus 19:34 (*"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"*).

- Several passages in the New Testament quote espousing the ethic of reciprocity, including the following:
 1. Matthew 7:12 *"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."*
 2. Luke 6:31 *"And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise."*

Application

The focus here is on the reduction of an enormous debt. Psalm 130:3-4 states, *"If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared."*

Man's hopelessness is revealed when he stands before God. His sin is overwhelming because he has transgressed God's law. There is nothing that he can possibly do to pay the sin debt he has incurred.

The first portion of the parable shows that our God is a God of mercy. David recognized this, when he said *"I am in deep distress. Let us fall into the hands of the LORD, for his mercy is great; but do not let me fall into the hands of men."* (2 Sam 24:14) After revealing David's sin to him, he showed mercy, as David had predicted.

The second portion of the parable has the finance minister punishing the poor man who owed him a small amount. This shows that just as we are forgiven, we must also show compassion and mercy to our fellow man. Like a mirror, we must reflect God's mercy and compassion.

Corrie ten Boom, (April 15, 1892 – April 15, 1983) was a Dutch, Christian Holocaust survivor who helped many Jews escape the Nazis during World War II.

- Ten Boom co-wrote her autobiography, *The Hiding Place*, which was later made into a movie of the same name.
- She was released from concentration camp due to a clerical error.
- In her book *Tramp for the Lord* (1974), she tells the story of how, after she had been teaching in Germany in 1947, she was approached by one of the cruelest former guards from the Ravensbrück camp, where her sister died after saying, *"There is no pit so deep that God's love is not deeper still"*.
- She was reluctant to forgive him, but prayed that she would be able to. She wrote that, *"For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then."*
- She also wrote (in the same passage) that in her post-war experience with other victims of Nazi brutality, it was those who were able to forgive who were best able to rebuild their lives.
- Mercy triumphs.

The public servant in the parable would not forgive. He applied the principle of justice without mercy. That was his mistake. James wrote, *"... judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!"* (James 2:13)

In the last act of the drama, the servant now again faces his master – but this time the master’s wrath is in full force. The master, who had earlier applied mercy, now also hands out justice without mercy. This is how we will be treated by God, if we do not show mercy to our fellow man.

God pardons the sinner as though he had never sinned at all. He forgives our sins and remembers them no more. (Psa 103:12; Jer 31:34) And God expects the forgiven sinner to do the same. We are God’s representatives on earth – let us also show the divine characteristic of mercy.

Points to Ponder

Does forgiveness only have to occur if the neighbor repents? (i.e. If someone robs you – is it ok to press charges?)

How should we show mercy in our lives?

How do we balance “forgiving” with “holding accountable”?

How about “tough love”? if we forgive easily, is that “enabling”?

What are ways in which we might abuse the mercy of others if we are not careful?

Parable of the Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5-8)

Luke records the Lord’s Prayer in shorter form than Matthew. Then, at the end of the prayer, he does not follow with the exhortation that we ought to forgive one another, but with this parable, in which Jesus taught the petitioner to be persistent.

The teaching here is echoed by the apostle Paul in his injunction to “pray continually” (I Thess 5:17).

The parable should be interpreted in the context of application to prayer.

The Parable

In the parable, a man arrives at midnight at the house of one of his friends.

- He asks for 3 loaves of bread, because he has a friend who just arrived on a long journey.
- The man has no food to set before him. No shops are open.
- But by coming at a late hour, the traveler placed his host in a predicament. He could either refuse hospitality, because he was out of bread, or accept the man into his house and ask his neighbors for help.
- This was an impossible situation; to refuse his friend hospitality in that culture would be unacceptable – he would bring shame on himself and his community. Yet, asking for food at such a late hour was also socially taboo, as he would incur the displeasure of his neighbor.

Houses in Israel, especially those in rural areas, were typically small, consisting of a single room. In many cases, only a single opening would let in light. Cooking was normally done outside, or under a lean-to.

- This single room was used for eating, dining, sleeping and living.
- When the sun sets, the head of the family would close and bar the door.
- Mats were spread out on the floor for sleeping, for the entire family.
- If one person got up, the entire family could be disturbed.

A loaf of bread in those days was small – about the size to fit well into one’s hand. Three would make a meal for one person. So the amount being asked for is not the issue. The issue is the timing – the host has to wake his friend in order to make his request.

Providing bread for a neighbor who ran out was a custom in Israel. The next day, when more bread was baked, the borrowed amount would be repaid.

The host is aware of the delicate nature of the situation:

- He knows the hour is late – yet he judges the need of his traveling friend is important enough to wake his neighbor.
- The neighbor expresses unwillingness, not inability, to grant the request.
- He will have to get up, wake his children, light a lamp, and find the bread then un-bar the door. It will be much easier for him if the host gives up and moves on.

But the host is persistent.

- He keeps on asking for bread. He asks boldly.
- Finally the neighbor gives in and accommodates his request.
- He receives “as much as he needs” – implying that he also was given other items to be eaten with the bread – traditionally olives, grape-molasses, and cheese.

Application

The word “persistence” is the key to the conclusion of the parable.

- The New Living translation calls it “shameless persistence.”
- The NIV uses “boldness”. The KJV uses “Importunity.”
- All are translated from the Greek word “anaideia.” This is the only place it is used in the New Testament. In that culture, the word conveys the meaning of “not losing one’s face.” The neighbor grants the request, because he knows that if the host goes back empty handed, he will “lose face” and bring shame on his house and village. The “friend” will also lose face to his neighbor, if he does not help him out.

Jesus applies the Jewish “Rule of Contrasts” to teach a greater lesson.

- The “lesser” is used to teach the “greater” principle.
- The “lesser principle” is the persistence of the host in asking for the bread.
- This teaches a “greater principle” – the importance for us to be persistent in our prayers.

Jesus points out the conclusion of the parable – if we go to God persistently, we will get an answer. *“So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 10 For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.”* (Verses 9-10)

We are also told, "...*he who stands firm to the end will be saved.*" (Matt 24:13). This trait of boldness and persistence should apply to our Christian walk, as well as our prayer life. While this principal and interpretation holds true, the main point of Jesus is persistence in prayer.

Points to Ponder

Traveling at night was common in the time of Jesus. The wise men traveled at night; so did Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus. This could be to escape the heat of the day, to avoid crowds, or to avoid being seen.

Should we be critical of the host, who did not keep extra food in his house in case of situations such as these?

Should we be critical of the traveler, for arriving late at night and imposing on his friend?

Jesus follows the parable with additional parabolic statements in verses 11-13. "*Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!*" What can we conclude from this passage?

"In bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the LORD." (1 Sam 1:10) What do you take from this passage?

Parable of the Widow and the Judge (Luke 18:1-8)

This parable is also sometimes called the Parable of the Unrighteous Judge, or the Parable of the Persistent Woman. It is a companion to the Parable of the Friend at Midnight.

Jesus gives an explanation for his purpose in telling this parable "...to them to teach it is always right to pray, and not to faint." As one commentator has stated, "the key to this parable is hanging at the door." In telling the purpose for the parable, Jesus lays down the principle in which it must be interpreted. The subject of prayer is continued by Jesus in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, which immediately follows.

Prayer is important. It is our avenue to God, the means by which we petition him, and also a means (along with worship) whereby we may praise him. It is at the same time privilege, honor, and duty. We are told to "pray without ceasing", and here Jesus reinforces the principle by opening the parable with the comment that it is "always right to pray." There is never a bad time to let God help you, through prayer.

Jesus gives the case of an honest woman before a dishonest judge.

The Character of the Judge

- He neither feared God nor regarded man
 - He had no concern for either his conscience or for his reputation
 - He had no concern for the wrath of God against him or of the respect of men
 - He took no care to do his duty to God or man
 - He was a stranger to both godliness and honor,

Wickedness in the place of judgment was one of the worst evils Solomon saw under the sun, (Ecc 3:16)

The Case of the Widow

- She was forced to appeal to the dishonest judge
- She was wronged by someone with more power and influence than her modest means allowed. The fact that her opponent did not have to appear in court may have indicated that it was a financial issue.
- She made a plea to the judge, "Grant me justice against my adversary."
- The only advantage she has is her persistence

The Plight of Widows in Biblical Times

- In general, widows had a difficult time. God established numerous protective laws to counteract the injustices often imposed on them.
- God defends the cause of widows (Deut 10:18)
- God curses the man who withholds justice from the widows (Deut 27:19)
- A husband could nullify any vow or obligation of his wife; but the vow of a widow was considered binding. (Numbers 30:9)
- Isaiah lamented that the rulers refused to even hear the plight of the widows (Isa 1:23)
- Malachi said that God would be quick to judge those who oppressed them (Mal 3:5)

God's Charge to Magistrates

- Not to do violence to the widow (Jer 21:3)
- To judge the fatherless, and plead for the widow (Isa 1:17)
- To be their patrons and protectors; then they are as gods, for God is so (Psa 68:5)
- But this judge had no regard for God's laws

The Judge Reacts

- He frowned upon her, and took no notice of her cause
- She had no bribe to give him
- She had no great man whom the judge respected to speak for her
- But her constant cries for help finally drove him to rule in her favor

Jesus applies this principle for the encouragement of God's people to pray with faith and perseverance:

- He assures them that God will at length be gracious to them
- If the judge avenged the widow, for whom he had no regard, then surely God will avenge his own people
- We must "cry to him" day and night, then he will be longsuffering toward us.

Jesus contrasts the worst in man to the best in God. We should not equate God as an unemotional, uncaring deity far above the fray on earth. Rather, he cares for and listens to His own people. The judge listened to the widow to get her off his back; God listens to us because he loves us and cares for us. He listens to and answers prayer.

If God's people cry out to him day and night, why does he sometimes delay in answering? Even Jesus asks, "Will he keep putting them off?" But the answer to this rhetorical question is of course not." He may keep us waiting; he may exercise our patience; but by doing so he strengthens our faith, and in due time he does provide an answer.

When the Son of Man Comes, Will There Be Any Faith on Earth?

- This question by Jesus ties the parable to the eschatological (end of the world) discussion in the previous chapter. He links the concept of justice (of the widow) to judgment (in the last days). Jesus has been appointed as judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:42)
- It is foretold that, when Christ comes to plead his people's cause, he will find little faith in comparison with what one might expect.
- Sometimes it seems there is no faith at all. (Psa 12:1-2).
- The world will not grow better; the last times will be perilous.
- When he comes to avenge his own elect he looks if there is any faith to help and to uphold, and wonders that there is none. (Isa 59:16; Isa 63:5)
- Wicked people will mock and say, "Where is the promise of his coming?" (2 Peter 3:4)
- They will challenge him to come. (Isa 5:10; Amos 5:19)
- His delay will harden them in their wickedness. (Matt 24:48)

The Widow's Persistence

- She triumphed over evil due to her perseverance.
- In the same way, we will triumph if we persevere.
- In a way, the widow is a picture of the church in prayer. The world oppresses us; we have no-one to turn to but God in prayer.
- Jesus exhorts us to be strong in our prayers, and faithful to the end.

Points to Ponder

Jesus says it is "always right to pray". What are some of the unusual times or unusual circumstances in which you have prayed?

Should we pray for vengeance on our enemies?

Christians say that God answers prayers in three ways; Yes, No, or "Not Now." Agnostic critics mock this, saying we could pray to a stone, and seemingly receive the same answers. How do you respond to this criticism?



10) Duties in the Kingdom (4)

Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37)



*"The Good Samaritan", Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn,
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The parable of the Good Samaritan has become part of our culture and vocabulary. We even have hospitals gearing that name, and the Jericho Road has found its way into song.

On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus is asked how to inherit eternal life, by an expert in the Old Testament scriptures. This man did not ask his question in ignorance; rather, he was testing Jesus. He addressed Jesus as "teacher", thus recognizing him as a person of authority in religious matters.

Rather than answering the question directly, Jesus skillfully asks a counter-question: "What is written in the Law?"

The expert answered by citing two commands:

1. "Love the Lord your God with all of your heart and all of your soul and with all of your strength and with all your mind", and,
2. "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus points out that the theologian has answered correctly. "Do this and you will live", Jesus says. Of course, when he says "live" he means to live eternally.

Not so easily outdone, the theologian brings up an even more fundamental and (in that time) controversial question: "And who is my neighbor?"

The Jew lived in a circular world; he placed himself at the center, surrounded by his immediate family, then his kinsmen, and finally all other Jews. The word "neighbor" to the Jew, had a circular meaning – "he is a brother to me and I to him." To the Jew, the lines were clearly drawn – a neighbor was defined by family and nationality. The well being of those on the "inside" was protected at the cost of those on the "outside." Jesus manages to put that concept on its head and shake up the man's concept of his neighbor.

In Jesus day, there was an influx of non-Jews into Israel. The Samaritans separated the Jews in the south from those in the north. Roman occupation forces were everywhere. Hellenistic (Greek) travelers were often present. Israel was a bridge of nations; every day most people rubbed elbows with someone who was not a Jew. The question "who is my neighbor" was common.

Jesus, in answering the theologian, invokes the Golden Rule (Luke 6:31) and tells the story of the Good Samaritan. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho is only 17 miles (27 km) long. Along that stretch it drops 3,300 feet, or nearly 2/3 of a mile. The road is virtually uninhabited, with limestone cliffs and gullies on both sides of the road, and sparse vegetation. In Biblical times, it was given the name, "The Path of Blood" due to the unsafe nature of travels there, where people were often the victims of ambushes by criminals.

The Traveler

- In Jesus story, the traveler is robbed, stripped and beaten, and left for dead.
- We are not told his nationality; perhaps, stripped of his clothing, his nationality was not apparent to those passing by. This may be by design – Jesus wanted the theologian to realize that being a neighbor does not adhere to nationalities.

The Priest

- A high number of priests had taken up residence in Jericho, "The City of Palms". Hence, it would be common for priests to make the journey to and from Jerusalem.
- Despite being a "man of God" and knowing all the scriptures that would dictate that the poor man who was robbed should be helped, the priest passes by the other side.
- He gives the man no help or hope.

The Levite

- This man acts in the same way as the priest.
- A Levite is a member of the Hebrew tribe of Levi.
- When Joshua led the Israelites into the land of Canaan, the Levites were the only Israelite tribe who received cities but no tribal land "because the Lord the God of Israel himself is their possession".
- The Tribe of Levi served particular religious duties for the Israelites and had political responsibilities as well. In return, the landed tribes were expected to give tithe to the Levites.

The Samaritan

- In the parable, the Samaritan is the only one who helps the poor traveler.
- He is filled with pity. He took care of his physical and financial needs. He invested both time and money.

Implications

- The priest and Levite may have thought the man to be dead. By law they were not to touch a corpse of anyone who was not a close relative (Lev 21:1-4) and would become unclean if touching a corpse.
 - They would inconvenience themselves socially (by being unclean)
 - Financially (by paying burial costs)
 - Professionally (by being barred from their duties for seven days (Num 19:11))
- The fact is, both the priest and the Levite showed no mercy.

The Samaritan however, is the hero of the story:

- He knows what he should do, and he does it well.
- Race, religion and class distinctions are not important to him.
- He only sees a fellow human in need of help.

- The innkeeper knows the reputation of the Samaritan, and trusts him to pay what is needed.

This man, in the normal course of events, might be despised by the man he helped:

- Sometime between 9 and 6 B.C. Samaritans had desecrated the temple to prevent the Jews from celebrating the Passover feast. They did this by scattering human bones across the courts of the temple.
- They had built their own temple on Mount Gerazim. (The Jews later destroyed this temple in 126 A.D.)
- They settled in the land of the Jews during the Babylonian exile.
- The Jews in general despise the Samaritans, considering them half breeds and tainted. Many would even cross the Jordan River to avoid passing through their territory when traveling from North to South.

Application

In his earthly ministry, Jesus taught the far-reaching demands of the Law, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” In the Sermon on the Mount, the command does not stop with the neighbor but includes the enemy as well, “Love your Enemies.” (Matt 5:44; Luke 6:27)

For the theologian, the question was, “where do we draw the line”? He wanted to know if love has limits. He wanted to justify his own limited actions toward others, by having Jesus agree that he had fulfilled the Law. But Jesus skillfully tears apart every possible defense of the teacher of the Law:

- He did not teach that a Jew had found an injured Samaritan; this may have caused an adverse reaction, as the hard-line Jews would consider the man not a hero, but a traitor.
- If Jesus has used the triad of Priest, Levite and Israelite (instead of Samaritan) this would only have created a contrast between religious leaders and the common people.
- Jesus did not paint the man who was robbed as rich, as a merchant, or anyone who would be able to repay the kindness given to him. Instead, the kindness of the Samaritan was presented as a one-way street.
- By showing the Samaritan as the one who shows love and kindness, he puts the teacher of the Law on the defensive – he must acknowledge that the goodness of the Samaritan exceeds that of the priest and Levite.

This parable is timeless. You can substitute in today’s nationalities, occupations, and races – and the powerful outcome remains the same. It is an indictment against anyone who has ever raised protective barriers in order to live a sheltered life.

Love your neighbor as yourself is a command that reaches out beyond our close circle of friends and family. It is a call to show mercy to all unfortunate people. It is a cry to affluent nations to help the poor nations of the world.

The message Jesus teaches is summarized by the parting words he gives to the theologian: “Go and do likewise.” Or, in the language of James, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” (James 1:22)

Points to Ponder

We must acknowledge that we are in danger of assuming the same attitude of the priest or Levite when we encounter those in need. What factors drive us today to have “hard hearts” in regard to the needy?

Sometimes helping the needy seems to come in direct conflict with the commandment to be a good steward. We worry that the money or resources we appropriate will be misused or squandered. How do we resolve this conflict?

Should we give money to panhandlers?

Should the church give money to people who come to us asking for it? What checks or safeguards, if any, should we put in place to dictate how we spend our benevolence money?

Why do you think this parable is so loved by many?

What enemies do we have? Based on this parable, what should we be doing toward them?

Discuss Rom 12:19-21: “Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1-16)



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Also known as “Workers in the Vineyard”, this is one of Matthew’s “Kingdom Parables.” But this one does not end with the phrase, “go and do likewise”.

The parable follows Peter’s question to Jesus in Matt 19:27, “*We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?*”

- Jesus follows this question in verses 28-30 with a discourse about the many spiritual blessings which his followers will receive.
- He ends his teaching on this with the statement, “*but many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.*”
- From this point he launches into this parable.

Generally grapes are picked in the month of September in the Bible lands.

- In September, the period from sunrise to sunset is approximately 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.
- Discounting breaks for meals and resting, most workers considered ten hours the normal length of a working day.
- In Israel, the daytime temperatures can still get very warm in September, so the workers will experience the literal “heat of the day”.
- Those hired later in the day are rested, and can apply more energy to the task at hand.

A reasonable sum of one denarius was paid for a typical day laborer. These laborers would congregate in the city center, starting at 5:00 am, hoping that an employer would hire them for

the day. Because they have no steady employment, they are fully dependent on the employer – more so than the employer is on them. Those with ambition would labor hard, hoping to be rehired for the following day, or perhaps on a permanent basis.

By providing employment, the landowner shows a measure of kindness.

- In the parable, the first group that is hired is promised a denarius – but the other groups are only promised “what is right.”
- Thus, they placed themselves at the mercy of the landowner – perhaps this means he had a reputation as paying what was fair and right.
- The workers are also permitted to eat as many grapes as they desire – typically, a landowner would expect to lose up to three percent of his crop in this way.

The need for even more laborers becomes evident as the work progresses.

- The owner of the vineyard knows when grapes need to be picked.
- If they are left just one or two days extra on the vine, the sugar content will become too high, reducing the market value of the wine to be produced.
- And if the harvest day is a Friday, there will be no work permitted on the Sabbath, and the harvesting is critical.
- He does all he can to hire enough laborers to finish the job.

The employer is the dominant figure in the parable.

- He is the one who visits the marketplace and hires the workers.
- He himself addresses those workers who feel they have been wronged.
- He is in control of the situation from beginning to end.
- He is the one to whom the kingdom of heaven is compared in the opening sentence.

The laborers are not busybodies who lounge around and spend their time in gossip.

- Even today, millions of people make their living in this way.
- We cannot apply the logic of Western society to the working patterns of Biblical Israel.
- Even late in the afternoon, some are waiting, hoping for even one or two hours of work.
- In their own way, the laborers demonstrate faithfulness, dedication, and dependability.

The laborers were typically paid at the end of each day.

- Employers were bound by scripture to not hold back wages overnight. (Lev 19:13)
- They were not to take advantage of a worker who was poor and needy. *“Pay him his wages each day before sunset, because he is poor and is counting on it. Otherwise he may cry to the LORD against you, and you will be guilty of sin.”* (Deut 24:15)
- These men literally “ate if they worked” and to not pay would deprive them and their families of food. It would be immoral as well as against God’s commandments.

The Landowner is a man of his word.

- He instructs his foreman to pay all the men, from those hired last to the first.
- It is quite a surprise when those hired in the afternoon receive a whole denarius. They are happy, joyful, and filled with gratitude. They know the landowner is a generous man.
- The workers hired at dawn then feel that they will receive more. But when they also receive a denarius, they are unhappy.
- They receive what they agreed to – yet they are now grumbling and complaining. They argue that this is unfair.

- They angrily list their grievances – they worked all day, from the morning, in the heat of the day, and only received what those who worked one hour received.

The landowner is the master of the situation.

- He does not take offense. Diffusing the situation, he addresses one of the men, calling him “friend”.
- He points out that he is not being unfair – the men hired in the morning agreed to work for a denarius.
- The employer does not argue, does not explain, and does not justify himself. He simply asks questions, and this diffuses the situation. This is a good example about how to conduct oneself in a difficult situation.
- By doing this he shows that the grumbling by the morning workers is simply a cover for envy and greed.

The point at issue is not fraud or deception.

- On the contrary, no-one was unfairly treated. (Being treated unequally does not equate to unfairness in this situation).
- If there is one person who sacrifices economy in favor of benevolence, it is the landowner. He would have been better off financially had he only paid to each the amount earned based on their time in the vineyard. There used to be a coin in circulation called a *pondion*; it was worth 1/12 of a denarius, and would be used to pay for a single hour of work.
- He asks, “Are you envious because I am generous?” With this question, he unmasks the envy and greed of the workers. He has shown mercy and kindness – they returned this with grumbling and scorn.

What is the lesson of the parable?

- This is how it is in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus says. Because God is so good, the principle of grace triumphs.
- In God’s kingdom, the principles of merit and ability are put aside so that grace may prevail – flying in the face of the Jewish doctrine of merit that was the rule of the day.
- The parable is not intended to teach a lesson in business practices or economics. God is not interested in profit. God does not practice “tit for tat” or “One good deed merits another.” The grace of God does not circulate in percentages; we will all receive the same grace regardless of our starting point or abilities if we die in a saved condition.

Application

- Our children often sing a song, “God is so good ... Is so good to me.” This song captures the application of the parable.
- In the kingdom of heaven, God’s goodness prevails.
- God liberally grants to all men according to his glorious riches. There is not a finite amount of grace to be apportioned among believers – there is an unlimited amount, so that each of us can get “all we need”! (See Phil 4:19)

Who are the “Grumblers”?

- May be compared to the older brother in the “Prodigal Son” parable.
- Reflects the attitude of scribes and Pharisees who counted on a “first position” status in God’s eyes, and who taught a works-based merit system of salvation.

Points to Ponder

Is there ever the need to treat people differently, in order to be fair? (Think about raising children...)

Why was it so important for Jesus to cut down the Jewish doctrine of merit with his disciples?

1. To enable them to fully appreciate the grace of God.
2. To see that their own place in the kingdom was a gift of grace. He did not want them to get the “big head” as apostles, when later they would be given miraculous gifts, etc. We must always remember that every talent, ability, blessing and dollar comes from God, not ourselves.
3. In the course of time, they would be welcoming Gentiles into the church. These would receive the same blessings as the Jews, God’s “chosen people”! This would be a difficult pill to swallow. (See Eph 3:6)

We must be careful that we do not rejoice “more heartily” for some are converted than others. God does not look at financial wealth, family status, intellect, or any other factor when measuring the worth of a soul.

The kingdom of heaven is free from human bureaucracy. It is not subject to man-made rules and stipulations. God’s grace is free to all who come to him in faith.

Does this parable reinforce a “grace only” doctrine?

- No. The landowner did not pay those who did no work at all.
- Some actions were required to receive the payment of the landowner. All the workers received “grace” in being paid generously.
- The point of the parable is that the final payment (heaven) will be the same for all who are saved, regardless of nationality, age of conversion, ability, etc.

Parable of the Unfaithful Steward (Luke 16:1-12)

This parable, also known as the “Parable of the Shrewd Manager” is considered by most to be the most puzzling of all the parables taught by Jesus. Numerous interpretations have been given, and scholars disagree sharply on the meaning and application of the parable. The parable deals with ethical considerations and brings forth several complex issues:

1. Does the lowering of the debts reveal dishonesty?
2. How is reducing debts owed to your master acting “shrewdly”?
3. Is Jesus condoning unethical behavior?
4. Should the parable end after the first part of verse 8?
5. Was the steward praised for finally being honest? Or is he praised for dealing shrewdly with his dishonesty, such that he got the upper hand on his master, whose hands were thus tied against punishing the steward?

As always, certain key criteria must be used to interpret this parable:

1. The interpretation must not contradict other teaching of Jesus or Biblical principles – it must harmonize the rest of scriptures to be considered as a possible construction.
2. The historic setting and business practices of people at that time must be understood and considered.
3. In science, there is a principal called “Occam’s Razor” – stating that the simplest explanation of a phenomenon is usually the best one and the one that applies. The same principal often also applies to interpreting parables – we should not read too much into the parable, but look for simple, common sense explanations.

The Setting

The parable must be interpreted in light of the Old Testament teachings about charging interest, or “usury”. Let’s look at several key passages on this topic:

- Ex 22:25 “If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender; charge him no interest.”
- Lev 25:35-37 “If one of your countrymen becomes poor and is unable to support himself among you, help him as you would an alien or a temporary resident, so he can continue to live among you. Do not take interest of any kind from him, but fear your God, so that your countryman may continue to live among you. 37 You must not lend him money at interest or sell him food at a profit.”
- Deut 23:19-20 “Do not charge your brother interest, whether on money or food or anything else that may earn interest. 20 You may charge a foreigner interest, but not a brother Israelite, so that the LORD your God may bless you in everything you put your hand to in the land you are entering to possess.”
- Psa 15:5 “...(he) who lends his money without usury and does not accept a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things will never be shaken.”
- Pro 28:8-9 “He who increases his wealth by exorbitant interest amasses it for another, who will be kind to the poor. If anyone turns a deaf ear to the law, even his prayers are detestable.”
- Eze 18:8 “He does not lend at usury or take excessive interest. He withholds his hand from doing wrong and judges fairly between man and man.”
- Eze 22:12 “In you men accept bribes to shed blood; you take usury and excessive interest and make unjust gain from your neighbors by extortion. And you have forgotten me, declares the Sovereign LORD.”

The law against charging interest should not be confused with the paying of interest by banks, as was acknowledged by Jesus in the parable of the talents; “Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.” (Mat 25:27)

Human nature what it is, over time certain practices developed to enable men to “get around” the Old Testament teachings regarding the charging of interest:

- Rich people would hire a manager, and give him full control of all or a portion of their wealth. Although unstated, it was “expected” that the manager would increase the wealth of the estate through the charging of interest. If this came to light, the landlord could claim ignorance and the manager would be forced to deal with the religious consequences.
- There was subtle but great pressure on the managers to perform well. In some cases, several managers were hired, and they competed against each other for the masters favor. A steward who made dramatic gains (through charging interest, even if secretly) would be praised and rewarded.
- It was common to draw up statements in which the debt and interest were listed as one total figure, to avoid such scrutiny:
 - The following note reveals interest and those who practiced it could be brought to court – *“I will pay Reuben 10 kor of wheat on the first day of Nisan and if I do not, then I will pay 4 kor of wheat annually in addition:”*
 - The following note was considered legal – *“I will pay Reuben 14 kor of wheat.”* What the note did not say was that the borrower had received only 10 kor and had to pay the balance in interest.

Typical Interest Rates in Biblical Times

- As shown above, men found ways to charge interest to each other when conducting business.
- Rates for borrowed wheat were as high as 20 percent, plus an additional 5 percent insurance against fluctuating prices and crop quality from year to year.
- Rates for oil were much higher, as high as 80 percent plus 20 percent insurance. The risk in lending olive oil was great, as the size and quality of olives vary greatly from year to year, and cheap oils from other sources could be added to the olive oil, and there were no good ways to verify the quality during those days.
- Note that these rates correspond well with the debt reduction given by the manager of the estate.

A manager was given a position of trust and authority. He was treated as a member of the household. He was given full authority to deal with debtors as he saw fit.

But should the manager be deemed incompetent, the master could call him in to audit the records and to force him to give an account for his transactions. If it was found that the steward was unworthy, he would be summarily dismissed, and would then be “black listed” – he would not be hired by other masters, who would check his history before entrusting him to manage their estates. He would be an outcast.

The Parable

In the parable, the manager is concerned with how he will live after he is thrown out by his master. So he comes up with a plan, to reduce the debts of those who have borrowed from the estate. Then, upon his departure, he will be welcomed into their homes.

- The first owed 100 measures of oil, about 868 gallons. Or nearly 4,000 liters. A typical olive tree yields 120 kg of olives, producing 25 liters of oil. So this was the production of around 150 trees or more. The bill is reduced by half.
- The second debtor owes 100 measures of wheat, or about 1000 bushels – the production of 100 acres in those times. The debt is reduced by 20 measures. These are large sums of money.

Interpretation

The debtors gladly wrote out the amounts they owed. They were not being dishonest – rather, they were indicating in their own hand writing the actual amount they had borrowed and should repay, without interest. Because the interest rates were lifted, honesty prevailed.

When the master reviewed the books, the manager was praised because he had acted shrewdly. Words of praise were given because the manager had assured the hospitality and generosity of the debtors. Additionally, he paved the way for his successor, who could begin his work without having to deal with unlawful existing accounts and ill will on the part of the masters debtors.

The manager ‘changed his ways” and was now acting as an honest citizen. The actions he took had placed his master in a favorable light.

Other Interpretations

Some believe that the manager acted shrewdly, but in his own interest. He was “under the gun” by his honest master, for gaining through unlawful usury. When he got statements from the debtors, in their writing, of the actual amounts, he was able to present an honest “set of books” and he removed the capability of the master to charge him with unlawful business practices. Thus outwitted, the master praised the manager for the clever way in which he resolved the situation and saved his own skin.

Others argue that the laws against charging interest applied only to the poor and fellow Israelites, and that in this case it cannot be assumed that the manager was acting unlawfully. These could have been international transactions with foreigners where these laws did not apply. Furthermore, it is difficult today to determine exactly how the Old Testament laws on usury were interpreted and applied by the teachers of the Law.

Others argue that the manager was dishonest because he overcharged the debtors, and was pocketing the difference between what they really owed, and what he charged them. In effect, the interest he was charging became his personal commission. Thus, when he had the debtors rewrite their statements, he was giving up his own dishonest gain. But this seems to be contradicted by the statement, “...how much do you owe my master?”

Application

Despite the differences in interpretations, some things can be stated with certainty:

1. The manager handled money that did not belong to him
2. The time of his dismissal came, and he was facing shame and poverty
3. By acting shrewdly, he benefited the master's debtors and looked to them for financial help in the future
4. Though the master had reservations about the manager, he praised him for his astute business transactions

The manager, who had gained a reputation of being dishonest, sought approval by being charitable to his master's debtors. He did not cling to worldly wealth, but gave it back generously. But the money he gave back was not his – in fact, it can be argued that the money he gave back was not even his master's money to begin with. Likewise, the people of this world should not set their hearts on worldly possessions, acting dishonestly for gain - but they should give generously to those in need.

We are like the manager – we have been entrusted to wealth. But this does not belong to us, but to God. Jesus, in this parable, counsels us to be generous, so that we may gain God's favor and be welcomed into his house eternally. We should use our earthly possessions for spiritual investments, just as worldly people use their money for more material gains.

Christians are sometimes inclined to relax their standards, and attempt to live both for God and for the pursuit of money. They want the best of two worlds. But Jesus chastises us – if the people who live for the world are shrewd at living in this way, then how much more should we be shrewd in living by divine standards? James admonishes those who attempt to live double lives, "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God." (James 4:4)

Points to Ponder

Which interpretation do you favor? Why?

Do you believe the Old Testament laws in regard to lending forbade all charging of interest, or only to the poor?

Of what value is Luke 16:10-12 in interpreting the parable?

11) The Need to be Ready for the Return of the King (1)

Parable of the Household Servants (Luke 12:35-40; Mark 13:32-37)

Sometimes also called the “Parable of the Watchful Servant”, two different versions of this parable are found in Mark and Luke. Although lumped together here, it is likely that this parable was told more than once, with Jesus varying the parable to suit different audiences.

In Mark the servants receive a specific assignment from the master of the house, who is going away. Jesus is speaking in context of the end of time, when he will return, advising his listeners to be alert and on guard, ready for when that time will come. The audience is pulled into the parable when Jesus says, *“Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the master of the house will come back.”*

In Luke’s version of the parable, all of the servants are expected to be ready to open the door when the master returns from a wedding banquet.

Mark divides the night into four watches, as was customary for the Romans. Luke, however, divides the night into three watches.

The two parables are not identical in wording; they have no parallel phrases or sentences. Yet the basic teaching of both parables is the same – a message of watchfulness for servants awaiting the return of their master.

Mark’s Account

The time of Jesus’ return is unknown to all. The angels in heaven lack the information, and even the Son of Man is not informed. Only the Father knows.

The man going away gives to each of his servants different assigned tasks.

- Some would be watchmen – watching over the entrance to the estate.
- Houses were often separated from the road or street by high walls with gated entrances.
- The doorkeepers would often have small houses near these gates. If someone knocked in the night, they would be responsible to verify who the guest was and either make or deny entrance.
- The doorkeepers would often be on duty at night and at rest during the day.
- To sleep on the job was a very serious offense. If the master’s knock was not immediately responded to, he would know the watchman was asleep.

The disciples of Jesus are exhorted to keep watch. Jesus applies the parable directly to his followers with the intentions that they understand the exhortation spiritually.

- The master of the house is Jesus, the Son of Man.
- He will return with great power and glory (Mark 13:26)
- We are to be on guard, vigilant, awaiting his return. The return will happen suddenly, without indication.
- Throughout the parable, the note of watchfulness is repeatedly sounded. In every verse (33-37) the idea is used either positively or negatively.

Luke's Account

In Luke's account, the parable is introduced as a comparison. Jesus compares the readiness of men to servants awaiting the return of their master from a wedding banquet. They stand ready, their lamps burning, waiting for his knock on the door.

Jesus tells us to likewise be ready. Clearly the message is on a spiritual plane. We cannot be certain when Jesus will "knock" – either at the end of time, or when we die.

But why do all of the servants have to say up awaiting the return of the master?

- Jesus wanted to portray the close relationship between the servants and the master.
- All servants are portrayed as of equal importance in Luke's parable.
- The master stands outside, and knocks. This image is repeated in Rev 3:20.

But then an unexpected turn of events occurs

- The master becomes the servant!
- He dresses himself for service.
- He has the servants recline at the table, and he waits on them.

This reversal of roles is in harmony with many other teachings of Jesus. Perhaps this was taught most vividly when he washed his servants' feet in the upper room (John 13:1-17).

When Jesus returns – we will be given a heavenly reward. In this way, we will be "served". Those of us who are ready for his return will thus be "served" as a reward for our faithfulness and readiness.

Points to Ponder

With Jesus teaching so clearly that only God knows when Jesus will return to earth – why do so many religious leaders make predictions about the second coming?

How does a believer "watch" for Jesus return?

Would you consider the two passages, in Luke and mark, as two separate parables or as a single parable?

Parable of the Servant with Authority (Matt 24:45-51; Luke 12:41-48)

In this parable, Jesus teaches the necessity of watchfulness – and he also stresses faithfulness.

The parable concerns a servant who is entrusted to run the affairs of the household while the master is away – including responsibility over the other servants. If he rules faithfully and wisely, he will be rewarded upon the master's return. But if he acts foolishly, he will be severely punished.

The Faithful Servant

Both Matthew and Luke show that Jesus is addressing his disciples at the time he tells this parable. (Matt 24:1, Luke 12:22)

As Jesus is speaking, he is interrupted by Peter (Luke 12:41) who asks, "*Lord, are you telling this parable to us, or to everyone?*" Peter was always ready to ask (Matt 15:15), being one of the more outgoing and bold disciples. Jesus answers the question by telling this parable.

The faithful servant demonstrates two indispensable characteristics; faithfulness and prudence.

- He is faithful and dependable, because his yes is yes and his no is no. He is trustworthy – his fellow servants know he does not break his word. He gives the other servants their food allowance at the proper time.
- He is also shrewd and prudent, because he has a way of anticipating problems, dealing with them quickly and skillfully, and solving things effectively. He is in control of every situation.

When the master returns, he makes an inspection tour. Everything is found to be in place and under control. He hears glowing reports about the servant. As a reward for his good work, he promotes him to be the manager over all his possessions. He places him as second in command. He has passed the test.

The Unfaithful Servant

It is natural for the master to want to leave his affairs in good hands. But humans are not always dependable. And when the master is away, the true nature of the servant comes out. In this case, the servant does not live up to the expectations of the master.

- The servant may have put up a façade when the master was at home.
- Now his true nature comes out.
- His true character is evident. He is sly, cruel, and intemperate.
- He is calculating – expecting the master to stay away a long time.
- He abuses the other servants – power goes to his head.
- He eats and drinks to excess, wasting the resources of the household.

When the master appears suddenly, the servant is caught off guard.

- The master can see him in a drunken condition.
- The master can see evidence that the household has not been properly managed.
- The master hears stories of abuse from his other servants.
- Nothing escapes him; everything becomes known to him.
- The master is now the judge and the law enforcer.

Jesus said, “He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

- The language should not be taken literally – if he is cut into pieces, how can he then be given a place?
- This is an idiom that must be understood metaphorically – just as we say today, “I’ll skin you alive!” or (in West Virginia) “I’ll skin your hide.”
- From the Qumran literature, we now understand that this phrase “cut him to pieces” is a more literal translation of “cut him off” from the midst of his people. This harmonizes with Psalm 37, in which the righteous will inherit the land, but the wicked will be cut off.

Therefore, we understand that the wicked servant is cast out and cut off from his people.

Interpretation

It is interesting to note some differences in wording between the accounts in Matthew and Luke:

Matthew	Luke
Faithful and Wise Servant	Faithful and Wise Manager
...beat his fellow servants	...beat the menservants and maidservants
...assign him a place with the hypocrites	...assign him a place with the unbelievers
Matthew was reminded of everything Jesus had told him (Jn 14:26)	Relied on reports handed down to him by Paul and other eye witnesses (Luke 1:2)
Wrote his gospel to the Jews	Wrote to the Hellenistic Greeks

The point of the parable is to call attention to the responsibility given to the followers of Jesus. Some have more responsibilities than others. But each has his duties; none are exempt.

- To underscore this lesson, Matthew follows this parable with the parables of the ten virgins and of the talents. Everyone is accountable to Jesus

If believers are faithful and wise in the discharge of their duties, Jesus will reward them handsomely.

If believers neglect their responsibilities and abuse their talents, at Jesus return they face complete separation from God and His people.

Luke adds an extra few verses at the end of the parable, in conclusion: *“That servant who knows his master’s will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.”*

Points to Ponder

The real test of a Christian is “what do we do when we are not around other Christians”. Why is this so difficult for us?

What authority have we been trusted with?

Parable of the Master of the House (Matt 24:45-51; Luke 12:41-46)

This is one of the many parables in which Jesus teaches about watchfulness. In this one, he also stresses faithfulness. As in other similar parables, a servant is entrusted with authority. If he does well, he will be rewarded when his master returns. But, if he behaves foolishly, he will be severely punished.

The Audience

- There seems to be some confusion by the disciples of Jesus, as Peter asks Jesus if Jesus was giving them teachings to be applied only to them, or to everyone (Luke 12:41)
- In both cases, Jesus is teaching things relative to the end of days.
- Both chapters state that Jesus was addressing his disciples (Matt 24:1, Luke 12:22)
- Peter, being aggressive and a natural leader, was always ready to ask or act on behalf of Jesus (Matt 15:15)
- Jesus does not answer his question directly, but instead tells another parable.

The Master

- Little is said of the master.
- We only know that he has servants, and he puts one of them in charge of his household while he is away.
- The master does not indicate the date or time of his return.

The Servant

- His duty is to be in charge of his fellow servants, to take care of their food, and the work of the household. This is a test to see how he will do.
- He is entrusted to care for all of the possessions of the master.
- He has the unwritten expectation to prove his faithfulness and prudence in the master's absence. It is up to him whether he acts faithfully, or foolishly.

Two Paths – The Faithful Servant

- If the servant acts faithfully, he will tend the household wisely.
- He will treat the other servants well, take care of the household possessions, and the master will find things in good order when he returns.
- He shows dependability – his yes is yes, his no is no.
- He does not break his word. He is shrewd, handling the work and business details of his master skillfully while he is in control.
- He cares for those entrusted to his care, and treats them with dignity and respect.
- “It will be good” for that servant when the master returns. The master will put him in charge of his household on a permanent basis.

Two Paths – The Unfaithful Servant

- If the servant is foolish, he will not manage the household wisely.
- Perhaps to this point he has put up a “façade” – acting one way in front of the master, while in his heart he is a different man.
- This long-term test will prove his real mettle – is he a wise, trustworthy servant, or when given freedom to act as he sees fit, will he “blow it”?

- His true character will emerge. He will think the master's return is far off – giving him time to waste in parties, and allowing him to act as a domineering overlord to his other servants.
- He begins to beat his fellow servants and spends time with drunkards.

The Master's Return

- Eventually the master returns – at a time not expected by the servant.
- Nothing escapes him – everything becomes known to him.
- The master is now the judge and law enforcer. He can pronounce the verdict on his servant, as well as administer the punishment.

“Cut Him to Pieces”

- If a man is literally “cut to pieces”, how can he take his place among the hypocrites?
- Is it possible that this is an idiom, such as when we say, “Skin him alive”?
- From the Qumran literature, some light has been shed on this phrase. The phrase “cut him to pieces” has been discovered to be a more literal translation of the phrase “to cut him off” from the midst of his people.
- The teaching harmonizes with Psalm 37, where it is repeatedly stated that the wicked will be “cut off”.
- The servant who fails his master will be thrown out of the household, and cut off from the righteous members of the household and his people.

Interpretation

Differences in the Two Writers

- He will be given a place with the “hypocrites” (Matthew) and the “unbelievers” (Luke). (A hypocrite is in fact an unbeliever). Matthew uses the term “hypocrite” frequently throughout his gospel.
- Luke begins with the term manager, focusing attention on the chief servant. But he calls him “servant” in the rest of the parable.
- The apostle Matthew was reminded of everything that Jesus told him (John 14:26).
- As a companion of Paul, Luke relied on the reports handed down by eyewitnesses and servants of the Word (Luke 1:2)

The point of the parable is to call attention to the responsibility of the follower of Jesus.

- Some receive greater privileges than others.
- But these also then have greater responsibilities.
- Whatever our responsibilities and gifts are, we will have to give account for how we have used them when the master (Jesus) returns.
- We will be rewarded abundantly if faithful. But if unfaithful, we will be punished severely.

Points to Ponder

Like the servant trusted with authority, our true character often emerges when we are alone or out of sight of other Christians.

Read Luke 12:47-48. Does this teach that there will be “degrees of punishment” in hell?

12) The Need to be Ready for the Return of the King (2)

Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matt 15:1-13)

In Matthew Chapter 24, Jesus completes a long discourse on the end of the age, the context covering both his teachings on the upcoming destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the world. In this context, Jesus then teaches two parables dealing with the end of time – the parable of the virgins, and the parable of the talents.



Die klugen und die törichten Jungfrauen, Cornelius, Peter von, Public Domain

In Jesus' discourse on the end of the age, he speaks of a division between those who are chosen, alert and faithful, and those who are not.

- “Two men will be in the field; one will be taken, and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.” (Matt 24:40-41)
- The faithful and wise servant will be placed in charge of all his master's possessions, but the wicked servant is assigned a place with the hypocrites. (Matt 24:45-51)
- This leads into the parable of the 10 virgins, where five enter the bridegroom's house, and the other five arrive to find the door locked.

- The theme of separating the good from the bad is continued in the parable of the talents (Matt 25:14-30) and the description of a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats (Matt 25:31-33)

The Wedding

Jesus pulls in the audience with an interesting story about a wedding – this is again something that everyone in the audience could relate to. Weddings are a pivotal point in our lives – it is a time of great joy, and great importance.

In Jesus day marriage generally took place at an early age – especially for the young woman involved. In most cases, marriages occurred when individuals reached their mid-teens. It was customary for the bride to be surrounded by 10 bridesmaids, who were her special friends and around the same age as the bride. They would then accompany the bride to the house of the bridegroom or his parents, where the wedding would be held.

In the parable, the 10 girls go to the home of the bride, to help prepare her for the wedding. There are numerous details that have to be carried out – arranging her clothing, hair, adornments, and preparations for the ceremony itself. Once ready, the wedding party would wait with much anticipation for the arrival of the bridegroom.

For some reason, the bridegroom is delayed until midnight. Jesus does not say why – but many of the listeners would imagine a typical scenario, where the settling of the dowry would cause this delay. This ancient custom involved the giving of gifts by the family of the bridegroom to the family of the bride. Discussions over the appropriate dowry could lead to long protracted negotiations and arguments, in true Middle Eastern negotiation style. The bridegroom could not go to his bride until the bride-price was paid and the marriage contract signed.

Then the cry is heard – “The bridegroom is coming!” It is then found that five of the bridesmaids have brought enough oil for the procession, and five have not. The small, household lamps typically pictured by many would not be appropriate for an outdoor procession, as the wind would easily blow out the flame. Rather, these lamps were likely torches – long poles with oil drenched rags at the top. The oil would have to be replenished about every 15 minutes, or the torches would go out. The torchbearers would have to have enough oil for the procession, as well as for the outdoor part of the festivities, which usually included dances by the bridesmaids.

Five of the girls are portrayed as unprepared. Worse, they had spent part of the time sleeping and waiting instead of rushing out at the appropriate time to buy oil. Now, the merchants would be closed, and locating oil would be difficult.

These girls ask those with oil to share with them. But an account is made of the oil on hand – there is not enough for all ten girls. The ones without enough oil will have to provide for themselves. If the oil is shared, they all will run out. They would have to go back to their homes, or wake an oil merchant or a friend to give them oil. In a rushed panic, they run out.

While the five foolish bridesmaids are out hunting for oil, the bridegroom comes. The wedding party goes forward, to his house, and being late at night, the door is locked. Anyone not part of the procession would not be allowed to enter; this was a common practice among the rich of that day, who controlled access to the house and courtyard for the purpose of security.

The girls who had to buy oil arrive, and knock at the door, asking to enter. But the bridegroom responds that he does not know them – the door remains closed.

Meaning

Jesus himself gives the conclusion to the parable – “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.” Jesus is obviously referring to himself as the bridegroom – and the coming of the bridegroom is equated to his eventual return to earth.

In his teachings, Jesus had often referred to himself as a bridegroom. When asked why his disciples did not fast, Jesus said, “How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast” (Matt 9:15)

The ending of the parable of the ten virgins is similar to the teaching of Jesus in Matt 7:21-23. “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me you evildoers!’ ”

The obvious teaching is that Jesus excludes from the kingdom of heaven all those who fail to do the will of God the father. Not all who prepare for the bridegroom are preparing properly – some are preparing foolishly, and will be left out of his house, which is heaven.

- The wise virgins are the ones who are properly prepared. They look ahead to the situation, and make sure they are prepared, no matter when the bridegroom returns. They follow the customary instructions carefully. Like them, the wise person will gain a knowledgeable insight into the scriptures, follow them carefully, and truly be ready for the return of Jesus.
- The foolish virgins are not guilty of any grievous offence – rather, despite good intentions, they are simply unprepared for the time and method of the coming of the bridegroom. They simply do not make adequate preparations. The demands of the bridegroom are not overbearing or unreasonable. They are simple to follow. Yet, despite this, they are unprepared. In the same way, many today are unprepared for the return of Jesus – despite his simple demands.

Watchfulness is not difficult – the demands of Jesus are easy to achieve. Despite this, many today are unwilling to do what he asks. Many have good intentions, but are drawn astray by the cares of this world, or false teaching. Many do not read and study the scriptures, to be certain that they are doing what the Lord demands.

In the parable, the concept of “preparedness” is front and center. Jesus will come suddenly – we do not know when he will come. Yet most live as though the day will never come. Imagine how people would react if it was announced that Jesus was coming in one month – the entire world would be changed. But he could come in one month – one year, or one day, or in one hour. We do not know when he will come – even Jesus himself does not know when he will return – only God knows. So we should be acting as though he could be coming at any time.

Are your torches ready? Do you have oil on hand? Are you ready for the return of the master?

Points to Ponder

In succession,

- The parable of the servant teaches faithfulness and wisdom;
- The parable of the ten virgins teaches preparedness;
- The parable of the talents communicates the virtue of faithfulness.

What do you think would happen if we somehow could know the exact hour when Jesus would return? Would this be good, or bad?

We must be careful not to interpret this parable allegorically – such interpretations come about because it is tempting to “read too much” into the details and cause us to under-stress the simple conclusion that Jesus intended. For example, some have hypothesized:

- Jesus is the bridegroom, the 10 virgins the church.
- The lamps are good works, because we are to let our light shine before men.
- The oil is the Holy Spirit; the oil merchants are Moses and the prophets. Other state that the oil means joy, or love, or good works, or the word of teaching.
- Such detailed interpretation leads to problems – for example, should question the uncharitable attitude of the wise virgins to the foolish virgins? Does this teach us that we should circle the wagons and “take care of our own” and ignore the unsaved?
- Further, the reply of the bridegroom, “I don’t know you” can bring critical evaluation.
- We should not “lose sight of the forest because of the trees”. Remember, parables are simple stories, with simple yet powerful conclusions. We must not bear them down with uncalled for detailed allegories.

Some would argue that the bridegroom is too harsh – why does he not open the door? What do you think?

Why are so many people unprepared for the return of Jesus? Why is it so hard to live our lives in such a way as to be ready for Jesus?

Parable of the Sheep and Goats (Matt 25:31-46)

After telling the parable of the talents, Jesus immediately launches the parable of the sheep and the goats.

We have characterized this passage as a Parable, although unlike most parables it does not relate a story of events happening to other characters.

It is evident from verse 31 that the time period of the events described is in the future, at the end of the world, the great judgment day. *"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory."*

As the lesson continues, Jesus makes plain what will happen on that day: *"All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left."*

The Day of Judgment

The Bible has many passages about the "day of judgment", including:

- John 5:28-29 *"Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."*
- Acts 17:30-31 *"In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."*
- Rom 14:10-12 *"You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written: 'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.' So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God."*
- 2 Cor. 5:9-10 *"So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad."*
- Rev 20:11-15 *"Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."*

The goat was used symbolically to represent those who were "out of favor" with God. This may originate to the "scapegoat offering" as outlined in Lev 16:21-23. In the parable, the "sheep" are separated to the right side, and the "goats" to the left side.

The most interesting part of the parable is the criteria which are used to determine who the “sheep” are and who the “goats” are:

Sheep	Goats
On the right	On the left
Blessed by the Father	Cursed by the Father
Receive an inheritance prepared since the creation of the world	Cast into eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels
Gave something to eat to the hungry	Did not give something to eat to the hungry
Gave something to drink to the thirsty	Did not give something to drink to the thirsty
Invited in strangers	Did not Invite in strangers
Clothed those who needed clothing	Did not clothe those who needed clothing
Took care of the sick	Ignored the sick
Visited those in prison	Did not visit those in prison

It is more interesting to note what is NOT in this list, than what is in the list:

- No mention of their spiritual “position” in the church
- No mention of their Biblical knowledge
- No mention of adherence to doctrine
- No mention of the number of church programs one is involved in

That is not to say that the above things were not important to Jesus or stressed at other times; but Jesus seems to be making a statement here, which magnifies the importance of how we treat those who are less fortunate than others.

Next, note the words of Jesus, “*I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.*” To fully understand the parable, we must consider who is meant by “brother of mine”. There are two schools of thought on this:

1. It could mean anyone in the world – any ‘neighbor’ - as might be inferred by the parable of the Good Samaritan.
2. It refers only to fellow Christians.

Which do you think applies?

- Consider Matt 12:46-50. Jesus told us that His brothers are those who are obedient to God. He refused to even acknowledge His blood relatives as His brothers! Which is to say, “His brethren” are our fellow Christians.
- See, for example, James 2:1-9. The poor James referred to were the poor within the Church, as shown in verse 5. We must be servants equally to all our fellow Christians, regardless of their ethnic, social or economic status.
- See also James 2:14-16, Acts 11:29, Rom 12:13, 2 Cor 9:1, Gal 2:10,

The stakes are high. The reward, or the punishment, is eternal, and binding.

This parable clearly tells of the judgment, and division of the world's people into the blessed, who are welcomed by the Father, and the cursed, who are cast out. The division in the parable is based on the acts of kindness and mercy done by people to their disadvantaged fellow men; Jesus identifies such kindness with kindness towards himself.

Points to Ponder

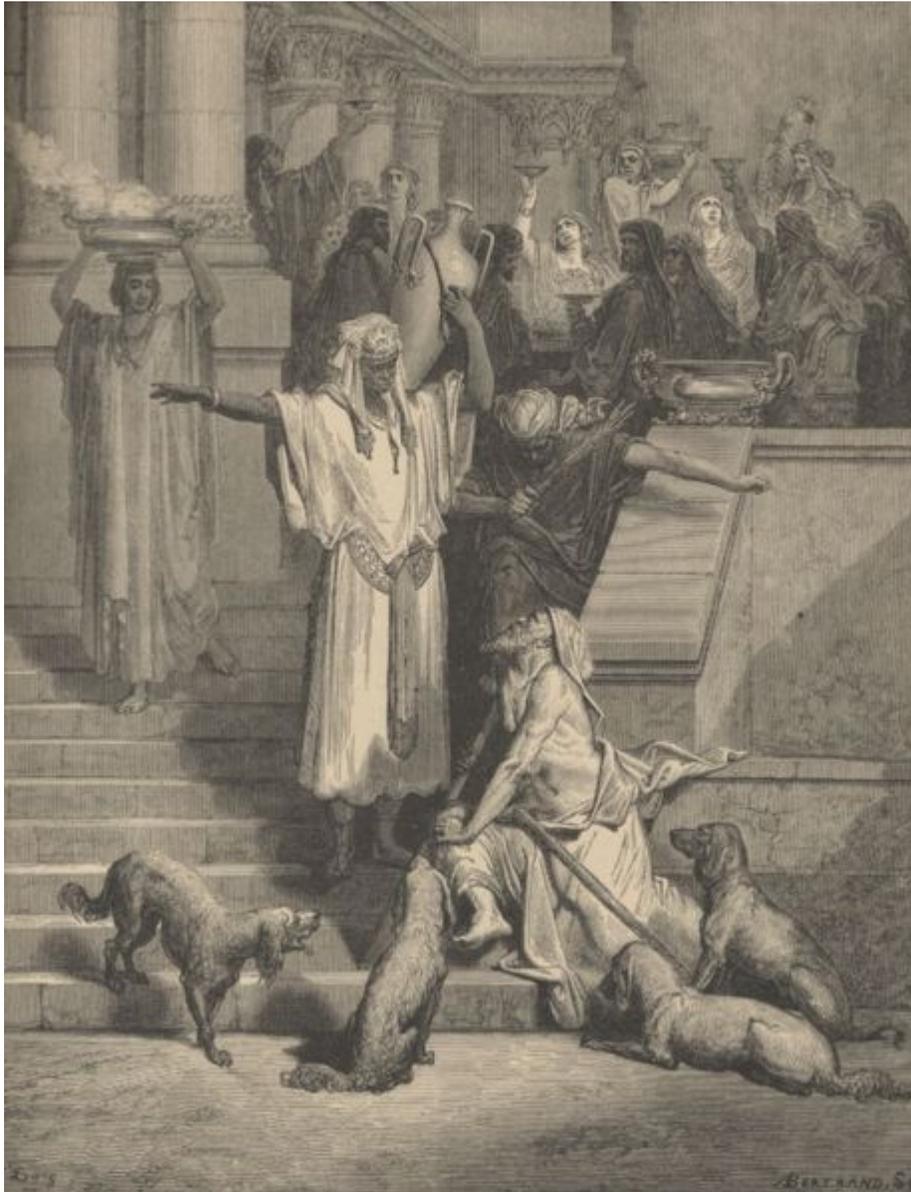
An alternative interpretation, one found by Calvinist theologian John Gill, is that the disadvantaged men spoken of are actually fellow Christians. And so instead of the division between blessed and cursed being on good works it is based on ones response to the people and message of Christ's Church. What do you think of this explanation?

Why do you think this explanation was offered by the Calvinist John Gill?

Should the criteria mentioned here by Jesus to separate the sheep and goats, be considered by us as the only applicable criteria for judgment? Why or why not?

What are your thoughts on who is meant by "brother of mine"? is this inclusive or exclusive?

Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)



Print by Gustave Doré illustrating the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, public domain

This parable has much in common with the parable of the Unfaithful Servant (also known as the Parable of the Shrewd Manager, Luke 16:1-12).

- The same introduction: “There was a rich man...”
- The admonition that it is better to store up treasures in heaven than on earth
- The call to repent before it is too late
- The challenge for the listener to turn from the world to putting trust in God
- The call to practice honesty and respect
- The application of mercy and love

The Here and Now

Jesus introduces two main characters – Lazarus and the rich man.

The rich man:

- Is dressed in purple (the color of wealth and royalty) and fine linen
- He lives in luxury and banquets
- He has an abundance of food for himself, and his household
- In spite of his wealth, Jesus does not name him

The poor man:

- Was a beggar
- Was evidently lame, as he was “laid at the gate” of the rich man every day
- Was covered with sores, and the dogs came and licked his sores
- His body was wasting away, hunger his constant companion
- He longed for the scraps of food from the rich man’s table that was fed to the dogs
- Despite his wretched existence, Jesus dignifies him by giving him a name – Lazarus
- Lazarus is an abbreviated form of “Eleazar” which means “God helps”

Both men were presented as Jews. But the rich man is not fulfilling God’s commandment to care for his poverty stricken countrymen. But evidently he was familiar enough with Lazarus to know his name.

Death came and put an end to the suffering of Lazarus. In the instant in which he died, everything was changed. His wasted body was laid to rest, and his soul was carried by angels into the comfort of the bosom of Abraham. Here, he would go from hunger to a messianic banquet in which he would never go hungry again.

Likewise, the rich man died, and his transformation was also dramatic. He went from a life of comfort and carefree living to torment in Hades. He lived in luxury, and was buried in luxury. No doubt his five brothers and extended family all attended his funeral, and spoke of how great he was. Hired mourners would make sure that the entire town knew how great of a man he was, at least in wealth, prosperity and influence.

The Then and There

On the other side of the grave, Lazarus remained silent toward the rich man. It was Abraham, not Lazarus, who spoke to the man. It was Abraham who instructed him in the realities of eternal destiny.

The rich man was in hellish torment. This involved extreme thirst and the agony of fire. In his lifetime he had severed his relationship with Abraham – his neglect of God’s commands nullified any claim to that spiritual heritage. He had lived not for God or for his fellow countrymen, but for himself. He pursued a life of self gratification. And now, in Hades, he was left to fend for himself.

The rich man was not punished because he had lived a wicked life. He had been a prominent citizen entertaining guests and living the life of a generous host. He could be spoken of in glowing words of praise and commendation. He did not deserve torment because of what he had done, but because of what he failed to do. He had disregarded God and his Word.

Even in hell, the rich man remained unrepentant. He did not appeal to God for mercy, but he appealed to Abraham. He called Abraham his father and expected him to come to his aid because of this physical relationship. He even instructed Abraham on how to show him relief, “send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue...” he wanted Abraham to send Lazarus as a servant, to wait on him in the afterlife. By his tone and words he showed that he still considered himself “above” Lazarus despite the present state in which the two of them found themselves.

On earth, Lazarus longed for crumbs from the table of the rich man. In Hades, the rich man longed for but a drop of water to cool his tongue – yet he received no comfort.

Abraham addressed the man as “son” – yet denied his request. His request could not be allowed, for two reasons:

1. The law of retribution. The rich man’s actions in his earthly life stood in direct relation to his fate in the next life. He was getting what he deserved. In his life, he had received good things, and Lazarus bad things. Now the table was turned. There was no wrong to be undone.
2. God’s irrevocable judgment was confirmed by the great chasm between the rich man and Lazarus. No one could go from one side to the other. The die was cast at the moment of death. (Heb 9:27)

The Five Brothers

Realizing that it was impossible for him to get relief, the thoughts of the rich man turned to his five brothers. He again begs Abraham to send Lazarus – this time, to go back to earth, to warn his brothers.

- Somehow he thought the chasm between the two sides of Hades did not prevent men from going back to earth.
- Lazarus remained silent – he did not condemn the rich man. He did not need to – the rich man’s own actions in life were what condemned him.
- He knew that his brothers did not take the scriptures seriously.
- Abraham refuses – saying that they already had Moses and the prophets.
- Again the man calls Abraham “father” and begs him to send anyone – surely they would listen to a dead man!
- But Abraham refuses – if they would not listen to the scriptures, then they would not even listen to a returning spirit.

If man rejects the word of God, he will not be brought to repentance even by someone risen from the dead.

- King Saul had Samuel brought up by the witch of Endor, yet he did not repent (I Sam 28:7-25)
- The Pharisees saw Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha after he was brought back from the dead. Yet they did not repent. Instead, they tried to kill him. (John 12:10)

Application

The parable is devoid of an introduction, and lacks a specific conclusion.

Many Pharisees were likely present when Jesus told this parable:

- It was told as a sequel to the parable of the shrewd manager
- Luke reveals the reaction of the money-loving Pharisees to Jesus teaching in Luke 16:14
- The Pharisees were self-righteous – justifying themselves in their own eyes. (Luke 16:15)
- In this context Jesus told this parable

The Pharisees could recognize themselves as the “rich man” in the parable:

- He lived a respectable life
- He called Abraham his father, and trusted in that relationship to secure their future
- He was a lover of money – as were they, when they sneered at Jesus
- The Pharisees were the ones who taught repeatedly the “law of retribution” in regard to future life. This doctrine does not fit the teaching of Jesus – but he took their own words and used it against them.
- They were the ones who had created a great chasm between themselves and the poor of society. They refused to provide spiritual food to those who most needed it.

The Pharisees often asked Jesus for a sign from heaven – but Jesus typically refused. In this parable, the rich man, representing the Pharisees, asks Abraham to send a sign from heaven to his brothers. He also is refused.

The application is timeless – we must listen to God’s word and obey it in our lifetime.

- We are taught to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, mind and soul. (Luke 10:27)
- This love should be expressed in giving to those who are needy. (Ps 112:9; 2 Cor 9:7)
- We show our love to God by growing in grace (2 Peter 3:18)
- We also teach our neighbors to love the Lord (Jer 31:34; Heb 8:11)

Points to Ponder

Some people argue whether this is a true story or a parable. What do you believe?

Although this is an interesting argument, does it make a difference in the application?

Anyone who gathers material wealth selfishly suffers spiritual bankruptcy. Likewise, any church that fails to evangelize dies a spiritual death.

Scripture nowhere teaches that being rich is sinful. But it warns that riches are a trap. (1 Tim 6:9) Why are riches such a barrier to Godliness?

The parable reiterates the words of the Psalmist: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” (Psa 95:7-8)

This is often called the “Parable of Lazarus and Dives” – because “Dives” is Latin for “Rich Man”

13) Other Parables and Parabolic Sayings

Salt and Light (Matt 5:13-16; Mark 9:50; Luke 14:34-35)



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Salt has both beneficial and destructive properties.

Beneficial:

- Our bodies need salt to survive.
- It is a food preservative.
- It enhances the taste of food.
- Used in many industrial processes.

Destructive:

- Corrosive, causes rust.
- Destructive – can kill in concentrated form.
- God turned Lot's wife into salt. (Gen 19:26)

We even use the phrase, "worth your salt". This means "not worth your wages". The Romans served out rations of salt and other necessities to their soldiers and civil servants. These rations were called by the general name of salt (sal), and when money was substituted for these rations, the stipend went by the name of sal-arium; from this we get the term salary.

Jesus has told us that we are the salt of the earth. Without salt, we would die. Salt is a necessary seasoning that makes life on earth possible.

Have you ever thought about the reason why Jesus never said we were the pepper of the earth? If we were the pepper of the earth, we would probably think we were hot stuff...

Have you ever eaten unsalted bread, or unsalted popcorn? This generally does not happen, but if it does, there is no joy in eating such food. All the ingredients are present except one, - that flavor of salt.

But how can salt become worthless?

- This is a new concept to many of us in modern times. The salt we use today, sodium chloride, is a stable compound.
- Our modern salt, purchased from the grocery store, has an ingredient to help keep it dry and free pouring, but this was not true years ago.
- So the salt stored in bags on the dirt floors would absorb moisture, cause the bags to rot and spill the salt out onto the floor.
- Also, in ancient times salt was obtained by evaporating water from the Dead Sea. This produced chlorides of potassium and magnesium, as well as the normal sodium chlorides. Generally, the salt crystals were the first to form, and could be thus separated to reasonable levels of purity. But, the salt was never pure, and in the presence of time and moisture, the residue could lose its saltiness over time.

What can you do with worthless salt? It is good for nothing. The farmers would not want it poured out on the land, as it would kill the crops. It was only good to be thrown on walking paths, to keep the weeds out and to be packed into a hard surface. Once the salt becomes “unsalty”, it cannot be salvaged and made salty again. To this day in Israel, salt is spread on the flat rooftops, which hardens into a hard surface, suitable as a gathering place.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addresses the crowds together and says, “You are the salt of the earth.” Just as salt stops deterioration, Christians should be a moral influence in the communities in which they live. By their words and deeds they should work against spiritual and moral corruption.

When salt is baked into a product, it dissolves and becomes invisible. It is not obvious that it is there, nor can you tell by visual examination how much salt is there. But the presence or lack of presence becomes instantly obvious when you take the first bite. Christians are not always seen, but are nonetheless potent agents, as they permeate society and constitute a restraining force in wicked and depraved world.

Light

After his short discourse on salt, Jesus discusses, in parallel, light. *“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”* (Matt 5:14-16)

In Proverbs 4:19 we read, *“But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know what makes them stumble.”*

In Ephesians 5:8,9 Paul says, *“For you were once darkness but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light.”* These humble, poor, despised Galileans were once darkness, but then they saw a great light –Jesus. They then were made able to be light in the Lord. In 2 Cor 4:4-6 Paul writes, *“The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of glory of Christ, who is the image of God. . . . [But] God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”*

We were once darkness, but now we are light in the Lord. How are we supposed to live? As children of the light. Jesus said he was the light of the world and then he told his disciples that they are the light of the world. In other words, the world is deep darkness--this world of professors, politicians, scientists, technocrats, plutocrats, movie stars, and religious gurus. But in this world of deep darkness, God planted his church as light.

What is darkness? In scientific terms, darkness is the absence of light – much as “cold” is simply the absence of heat. We take great comfort from the example that a small light can light a whole room, and can be seen from far away on a dark night. Our small light has a much bigger effect than we might realize.

It is absurd for Christians to desire to be like the world. Christians are not to retreat from the world into monasteries, but neither are we to seek to become like the world by following its fashions and darkness. We must be in the world and function as its light as we proclaim and practice the gospel of Jesus Christ. We must realize that although the world is sinful and dark, God loves it and sent his one and only Son to redeem it.

Christians are to reflect the light of Jesus to the world. This is the light of salvation, the light of eternal life, the light of the knowledge of God, the light of the joy of salvation, the light of hope, and the light that shines in darkness. It is the light that opens the eyes of the blind and causes them to see the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Our mission is to be light to the world. When the Lord Jesus Christ commissioned the apostle Paul, he told him, *"I am sending you to [the Gentiles] to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God"* (Acts 26:17-18). And Peter tells us in 1 Peter 2:9, *"You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."*

How do we function as light?

- First, we expose the reality of evil. The way of the wicked is deep darkness and they are stumbling, but they do not know why. They are confused and have no understanding of reality. But in Ephesians 5:13 we read, "Everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible."
- The Bible as the light also exposes the sinfulness of this world. The Bible says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105). What people value and hold dear is exposed as evil by the light of the gospel.
- We function as light by being part of the church, which is the light of the world.

Points to Ponder

"Have salt in yourselves, be at peace with each other," says Jesus (Mark 9:50). If Christians are unable to live at peace among ourselves, there is no way we can be effective the world. Instead, we will be branded as hypocrites.

Many people never read the Bible; yet they carefully watch those who do. Why do people who routinely take part in sinful practices take great delight when a religious person is "caught" and also found to be enticed into the same activities?

To what extent should Christian engage in politics?

Two Builders (Matt 7:24-27; Luke 6:47-48)

Those of us fortunate to have grown up in a Christian home are familiar with a song that is taught to children. This well-known song is based upon the parable of the two builders:

*The wise man built his house upon the rock, (repeat twice)
And the rains came tumbling down
The rains came down and the floods came up (repeat twice)
And the house on the rock stood firm*

*The foolish man built his house upon the sand, (repeat twice)
And the rains came tumbling down
The rains came down and the floods came up (repeat twice)
And the house on the sand went splat*

Jesus no doubt during his lifetime was witness to the sudden downpour of the frequent cloudbursts common in Biblical lands. The sudden appearance of much rain would turn dry creek beds into turbulent streams. An area that has been “high and dry” for years can within minutes become the location of violent flood waters.

This was a common problem, especially given the construction techniques common to that time. Houses were often made of hardened mud, on little or no foundations. Thieves were able to dig through the walls of such houses (Matt 6:19). Although experienced builders would know to build away from these dry gullies, the poor often had no choice but to use this land, which was of low cost or even abandoned for free building access due to the low value of such risky territory.

We see the same things today, both in this country, and in other parts of the world. Low income people build in low lying areas, due to the proximity of water and because they cannot afford to buy land elsewhere. Floods usually destroy the homes of the poor, but the wealthier families can afford to build on higher ground.

A wise builder selects a site upon a rock. Then he will not have to worry about the foundation of the house collapsing as the ground underneath it gives way, either due to flooding or gradual erosion. A house built upon rock has a foundation that will last.

A foolish or dishonest builder will build upon sand or shifting soil. Either the builder is unaware of the dangers, or he hopes to sell the house and let it be someone else’s problem. At first, the house looks desirable. It is close to water, making it easier in Biblical times for those who had to carry water to the house for cooking, cleaning or bathing. The house is likely not surrounded by other homes, and has a clear view, at least in one direction. As long as there is good weather and fair skies, all is good. But with the appearance of a sudden storm, all can be lost.

Matthew and Luke’s Account

The parable is presented a little differently in Matthew’s and Luke’s accounts. This can be explained as part of their tailoring the presentation to the audiences to which each wrote.

Matthew wrote to Jewish readers, living in Israel. He speaks of “building upon rock” “building on sand”. He also wrote about falling rain causing the flood, rising streams, and blowing winds. These were all familiar to the people of that area.

Luke, however, wrote to Hellenists, who were perhaps more familiar with the geography and weather patterns of ancient Greece, Asia Minor and other parts of the Mediterranean. He speaks of “digging down deep” to lay the foundation on a rock. This would make sense to people who were more accustomed to digging basements and deep footers. Luke also speaks of the flood coming, but does not speak of rain. Luke also speaks of building on “ground” as opposed to “sand” as used by Matthew.

These differences do not alter the meaning of the parable, but would make it more visual and meaningful for each intended audience.

Application

A person who hears Jesus’ words and puts them into practice is like the wise builder.

A person who does not accept or apply the words of Jesus is like the foolish builder. They are living a life without foundation, and will be swept away.

What is our foundation?

- Isaiah 28:15-17
- Eph 2:19-21
- I Peter 2:5-7
- I Cor 3:10-12

Points to Ponder

Several years ago, a small village of mud houses was built between Gaza and Ashkelon, at a distance that most felt was far enough removed from a dry gully bed. But during one winter in the Negev desert, a hard rain came, and the stream suddenly filled and overran its banks. It washed away the entire Bedouin encampment with the loss of both human life and livestock.

Similar imagery is used in Ezekiel 13:10-16. He describes a flimsy wall that is built, rain coming down in torrents, hailstones, and violent winds bursting forth. As a result, the wall collapses.

Both houses look the same to the novice. Only when the storms come do the differences in foundation become evident.

The foundation is “under the surface” – it is not clearly seen. It is what is laid in place before anything else. The entire house rests on the foundation.

Children in the Marketplace (Matt 11:16-19; Luke 7:31-35)

As we read in Luke, Jesus spoke this parable after a series of sayings regarding John the Baptist. At that time, John was imprisoned by Herod Antipas. And immediately after this parable, Jesus expresses frustration at the fault-finding approach used repeatedly by the Pharisees. In this context, in the presence of the crowds and his disciples, Jesus told the parable of the Children in the Marketplace.

The parable shows frustration on the part of Jesus. He was upset that both he and John the Baptist were misunderstood by the religious leaders of the day. In fact, this lack of understanding of the proper role of both men would culminate in their deaths.

Jesus begins the parable by stating, *"To what can I compare this generation?"* This question shows the frustration of Jesus, as he strains to find an example of the absurdity of the logic and reasoning that has been repeatedly thrown out by his religious "opponents" – the Pharisees, scribes and teachers of the law, the Jewish religious hierarchy.

This parable is really part of a longer section, beginning when some disciples of John come to Jesus, asking, *"Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"* Five or six times in a few chapters of Luke the question is asked - by John's followers, by Pharisees when Jesus is a guest at their house, by Jesus' own disciples, by Herod, and eventually Jesus himself asks "who do people say that I am?" The answer finally comes in Luke 9, in Peter's confession 'you are the Christ (Messiah)

The problem was, Jesus wasn't exactly acting in the way anyone expected. John's disciples were used to the messenger of God living a life of austerity - fasting and waiting for the promise to arrive. John lived in the wilderness, wore rough clothing and preached repentance and judgment.

On the other hand, the Pharisees expected God's messiah to live a good Jewish life - praying regularly at the Temple, associating with teachers of the law, fulfilling the commandments. Yet Jesus was described as 'a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners' - with a reputation for a celebratory lifestyle of eating and drinking in association in bad company, and a cavalier attitude toward the legal restrictions of Jewish life. There was no way they would consider him as the son of God.

Luke begins the parable with a reference to "this generation"; an expression that appears eighteen times in the Synoptic Gospels and is used to refer to Jesus' contemporaries as the last generation before the end, just prior to the approaching final judgment. This utterance always carries a negative connotation -- sometimes with the added phrases "faithless," "evil," and "adulterous".

In this parable the children represent the aforementioned "generation." Their refusal to play along with one another represents their accusations directed against both John and Jesus.

- They refused to "play wedding." To them, John the Baptist was a madman because he fasted while the children wanted to be merry.
- And they refused to "play funeral" - They reproached Jesus because he "ate with publicans while they [the children] insisted on strict separation from sinners."
- In John the children rejected the solemnity of repentance, while in Jesus they rejected the proclamation of the good news.

Message

The lesson of the parable is simple. The “generation” spoken of by Jesus looked at both John and Jesus with biased eyes. They therefore were missing out on all they had to offer through their ministries. And not only were they biased, but by rejecting both of them due to conflicting reasons, they used illogical reasoning to justify their actions.

The message of this parable is:

1. The joyful message of forgiveness should be freely celebrated and not dampened by legalistic restrictions.
2. The solemn message of repentance should not be ignored but taken up with full seriousness.
3. The truth of both of these principles will be demonstrated by those who implement them.

Both John and Jesus were rejected by those whose hearts were hardened. Jesus showed how foolish these people were by comparing them to children who don't get what they expect. They rejected John for fasting and refraining from wine, and rejected Jesus for eating and drinking. Their expectations could only result in the categorical rejection of any prophet.

Points to Ponder

Jesus concluded the parable by quoting a common saying: "Wisdom is justified (proven right) by her children." What does this mean?

Do we make time to dance with those who are joyful and weep with those who are mourning?

Do we make room for the Kingdom of God in our marketplace?

Do we really let faith impact on our lives or are we oblivious to its demands? Surely the message of the incarnation was that God joined in. Jesus laughed, celebrated, grieved, and suffered. Jesus was fully human and invites us to be fully human too by following his example. Are we willing to join in?

Are there things that we may do, that cause us to reject the message because of the messenger?

Are we too critical of speaking styles, ability, appearance and mannerisms of our ministers? How do we strike a proper balance as we strive to hire someone who is effective?

There is a time for everything – including a time to laugh, and a time to cry (Ecc. 3)

Parable of the Burglar (Matt 24:42-44; Luke 12:39-40)

Because of its brevity, this is often considered a “parabolic saying” rather than a parable. Earlier, we had looked at the Parable of the Waiting Servants – at the end of that parable the servants receive a reward for their watchfulness and faithfulness. But the parable of the burglar constitutes a warning. The first describes a joyful event; this one, a potential disaster.

This parabolic statement is based on the realities of life.

- Everyone is subject to burglaries. When the economic situation is bad, the numbers of burglaries increase.
- The more money you have, the more desirable you are as a target.
- In that time, thieves could literally dig a hole in the side of the house, breaking out the bricks, operating under the cover of darkness.
- Thieves must either steal by coming when they will not get caught, or by overpowering those inside the house.

Similar Biblical Imagery

Paul uses the image of a thief in the night, in I Thess 5:2-4 - *“...for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, “Peace and safety,” destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief.”*

Peter paints a similar picture in 2 Peter 3:10 – *“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.”*

In the book of Revelation, John uses similar imagery in addressing the church at Sardis, in Rev 3:3 – *“Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.”*

And once again, in Rev 16:15 – *“Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed.”*

Jesus, in predicting his own return, compares his coming to the days of Noah in Matt 24:38-39 – *“For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.”*

Points to Ponder

In the parable, Jesus repeats the same warning, *“So you must be ready because the Son of Man will come at an hour you do not expect him.”* What should we be doing to “be ready”?

Is Jesus warning his disciples of imminent danger? Don't we expect his disciples to look forward to his return as a joyous occasion, not with dread?

- Those who listen attentively to him and in obedience act on Jesus words will be ready – and thus joyous.

- Those people who are not diligent in following him will not be ready, and thus will look at his coming with dread, as they are not ready. Instead of joy, they are filled with anxiety and worry.

Just as in those days, today many (actually most) live in complete disregard of the coming judgment. Even those who are ready look in sadness at the number of people who are not living as they should, and who thus are not ready for Jesus coming.

Parable of the Farmer and Servant (Luke 17:7-10)

Since none of Jesus' disciples (with the possible exception of James and John, see Mk 1:20) were likely to have had any experience with servants, the parable was probably addressed to another audience. The central thrust of the parable lends weight to the conjecture that the self-righteous Pharisee is in mind. This explanation also fits well with the theme of many other parables, which were also directed to the self-righteous Pharisees.

Slaves in the First Century

We like to translate Greek doulos as "servant," but the word used in this passage describes a slave, who not only works in the field, but also performs household chores.

- The very thought of slavery is so repugnant to us that it is difficult to read about slavery in the Bible without loading the subject with emotional and historical baggage.
- But to Jews in the First Century Roman Empire, slavery was a fact of life.
- The average person didn't own slaves, but many villages would have one or more wealthy persons who owned slaves.

People generally entered into slavery in five ways:

1. Born of slave parents
2. Purchased
3. Failure to pay a debt
4. As prisoners of war
5. Self-sale. Though it might seem strange to us, a number of people would sell themselves into slavery, principally "to enter a life that was easier and more secure than existence as a poor, freeborn person." Slaves sometimes received an education at their owner's expense, and, if they sold themselves to a Roman citizen, when freed they might expect to become Roman citizens themselves.

While the Greeks considered slaves to be sub-human, Hebrew history in Egypt taught Jews to show respect to their slaves. And slaves did not just have servile duties. Some might be tutors, physicians, companions, household managers, sales agents, and administrators.

But the slave Jesus describes in this brief parable, probably the only slave in this household, got mostly hard labor - plowing, looking after livestock, as well as cooking and household chores. His was a pretty hard existence.

Being Served or Serving (17:7-8)

"Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'?" (17:7-8)

Jesus invites his hearers to imagine that they had such a slave to work around their house and farm. Many of his poor listeners would have loved to have their own slave to wait on them!

Then Jesus asks a rhetorical question: Does the master offer to fix dinner for the slave or the other way around? Of course, the slave had to prepare the meal and serve the master and his family before he could eat himself - and all that after a hard day in the fields!

Even today, certain kinds of jobs sometimes require extra hours. Sometimes contractor crews must work into the wee hours of the morning to get a job finished on schedule. People have to work nights and weekends. A salesman may have to travel at nights and on weekends. That's part of the job; it comes with the territory. People sometimes work two or three jobs because they have to. Is it fair? No. But it's required by the responsibilities they have.

The point here is that, fair or not, the slave was expected to work in the fields AND fix the food. That was his duty. The master wasn't there to serve the slave, but the slave to serve the master.

Thanking the Servant (17:9)

The master doesn't "owe" the servant a reward for his hard work, says Jesus. *"Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do?"* (17:9)

We Americans, steeped in a management culture that seeks to motivate employees, expect to be thanked and resent it if we are not.

- We don't think we are paid enough for what we do!
- But don't impose your own social expectations on the First Century.
- Especially don't load this poor servant down with your baggage. That isn't the way he thinks. He understands that he is doing his duty. That's all. He doesn't deserve a reward for doing it, but he knows he'll be punished for neglecting or shirking his duty.

While we might expect a "thank you," in Greek the word *charis* implies more. Here the phrase, literally "have gratitude" is used in the sense of "to be grateful," the idea of a debt of gratitude that must be offered to even the score, placing the master somehow in debt to the slave.

A Servant's Duty (17:9-10)

"Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'" (17:9-10)

"Duty" and "order" and "command" aren't very popular concepts in American culture.

- In the first half of the Twentieth Century the concept of duty was widely accepted.
- But in the Sixties, there was a growing tolerance, everyone to "do their own thing."
- Authority was the target of widespread protest.
- Civil disobedience was a popular social tool.
- The role of women and men changed.
- Personal "space" and independence became considered a person's right.

The society shifted. Here's an example, in the Girl Scout Pledge.

- Several years ago, the pledge was, "On my honor, I will try: to do my duty to God and my country, to help other people at all times, and to obey the Girl Scout law."
- Times have changed, and the words "duty" and "obey" have given way to softer words.
- Now the girls recite, "On my honor, I will try: to serve God and my country, to help people at all times, and to live by the Girl Scout Law."

The meaning hasn't changed that much, but it is softer. When we drop the ideas of "duty" and "obedience" from our relationship with God, however, we miss one of the essential components

of true discipleship. To be real disciples we must be obedient to God's word and do our duty as followers of Jesus in a fallen world.

Unworthy Servants (17:10)

"So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.' " (17:10)

This is a hard saying. Jesus is telling us that we need to rid ourselves of the thought that by our actions we "deserve" any thanks, or that we have "earned" something. A slave works constantly, yet by all of his actions does not "earn" anything. We must dispense with an attitude of "entitlement" and instead see ourselves as "unworthy slaves."

If this is hard for us, imagine how it felt to the ears of the typical Pharisee, who loved to be seen by men and made great public spectacles of their own "acts of faith". By their very life, actions and even what they wore they set themselves up not as humble servants, but as men elevated above others by their own self-professed righteousness.

Points to Ponder

It is easy for us to get this backwards. For example, consider how we often pray:

- Dear God, please help me succeed in my job.
- Dear God, please help my mother get well. Please heal her.
- Dear God, please help this church to grow and succeed.
- Dear God, help me to get these bills paid off.

In this situation, it is easy to forget that we are the servants. We often think of God as the benevolent creator who is there to serve us and give us what we desire. But in reality it is the other way around. How often do we pray like this?

- Dear God, help me to be a humble servant.
- Guide me to the work that I should do today.
- Help me to understand how I can best use my talents to further the Kingdom.
- Help me to know what to do to help Joe and John resolve their differences.

The legalistic Pharisee attempted to serve God in a manner that they themselves could not tolerate from their servants. Paul's description of his Jewish kinsmen is appropriate: *"I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. For being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness"* (Rom 10:2-3)

The purpose of the parable is not to teach that we are to "slave away" constantly in service to God, with no breaks or expectation of reward, either on this earth or in heaven. Rather, the moral is that we are the servants, and God is the master. It is in that "spirit" that we should serve God. A servant can work nonstop for a master, while not honoring his master in his heart or doing it out of love, respect, or loyalty. A servant may do this only out of fear of reprisal. God demands more from us – we are to serve him out of our love – and because "He loved us first".

We are not saved based on the amount of meritorious work that we do (Rom 3:27; Ep 2:8-9).