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2020: Never Has a Man Spoken the Way This Man Speaks

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Never Has a Man Spoken the Way This Man Speaks

The Parables of Jesus

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The Parables of Jesus

Edited by David McClister

**Florida College Annual Lectures
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Contents

Foreword	vii
Preface	ix
Abbreviations.	xi

Part One—The Evening Lectures

How Will You Understand All the Parables?.	3
<i>Edwin L. Crozier</i>	
Was Lost and Has Been Found.	27
<i>Phillip Shumake</i>	
Founded on the Rock	39
<i>David Banning</i>	

Part Two—The Day Lectures

New Wine in Old Wineskins.	51
<i>Matthew W. Bassford</i>	
The Last Shall Be First.	61
<i>Jonathan Caldwell</i>	
Count the Cost.	81
<i>Payton “PJ” Anderson</i>	
Allow Both to Grow Together	95
<i>Jared W. Saltz</i>	

Will He Find Faith?	111
<i>Mark Roberts</i>	
Be Merciful to Me, the Sinner	125
<i>Neil Tremblett</i>	
Should You Not Have Had Mercy?	141
<i>Coulter A. Wickerham</i>	
Who Is My Neighbor?	155
<i>Dennis G. Allan</i>	
What Will He Do?	175
<i>Dominic Venuso</i>	
Be on the Alert.	195
<i>Jeremy N. Sweets</i>	
Rich Toward God	213
<i>Norm Webb, Jr.</i>	
There Is Still Room	223
<i>David Padfield</i>	
Contributors	237

Foreword

The parables of Jesus occupy a unique place in the Bible. While we find parables in some of the Old Testament books (like the Parable of the Trees in Judges 9, or the Parable of the Vine in Isaiah 5), the parables of Jesus surpass them in their depth and frequency. “With many such parables he spoke the word to them ... he did not speak to them without a parable” (Mark 4:33f, RSV). It could be said that parables were Jesus’ most characteristic form of teaching. This is not surprising, since Jesus wanted to convey His message to everyone. Parables were understandable by the common people as well as the educated elite.

And yet Jesus’ parables also had a paradoxical way of concealing their messages from those who refused to make the effort to understand them or who did not want to hear. The message was spoken, and yet for some it remained unheard. Studying the parables thus becomes an exercise in hearing. They challenge us to open our ears and hearts to receive the message of the kingdom of God. I hope this series of lectures will remind us all of the need to heed Jesus’ exhortation, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” As always, I offer my sincerest thanks to the speakers who have spent much time and effort to bring these lessons to us, as well as everyone at Florida College who has made this week’s events possible.

H. E. “Buddy” Payne
President, Florida College

Preface

Jesus' teaching left an impression upon the people of his day. "They were amazed at His teaching" (Luke 4:23). Sometimes the amazement was because of the authority with which Jesus spoke, or sometimes it was simply the way Jesus spoke, speaking of God as His own Father. Either way, people agreed, "No man ever spoke like this man" (John 7:46, RSV). Perhaps the greatest shock came when people listened to the parables of Jesus. On their surface they are simple stories drawn from familiar parts of everyday life in the ancient world. Listen to them carefully, however, and they are strange stories indeed. We hear of a man who got rid of everything he had just to buy a pearl. We hear of people who were forgiven debts of millions of dollars, or of a father who took back his traitorous son. Truly, many things in the parables are strange and even up-side down from what we would expect to hear. More than that, they are shocking. Their unusual elements hit us with unexpected force. The people who heard Jesus' parables could not help but wonder, in what kind of world would a tax-collector be more righteous than a Pharisee? Or why would a man pay an entire day's pay to men who had been working for only one hour? And what kind of person would build a house on sand? Who would praise a money manager who gave his client's money away?

The answer is that these things describe what it is like in the kingdom of God. It is not like any kingdom that has appeared before, nor that will appear after. It is truly a kingdom "not of this world," a kingdom where heavenly values rule the lives of its citizens. These values are so different from those that operate in the world that the appearing of the kingdom among men causes them

to wonder at its strangeness. It is into this world, God's world, God's kingdom, that the parables of Jesus invited men then and invite us today. They are, as it were, introductory pictures, or maps, of what the kingdom is like.

It is our sincere hope that the lectures in this volume will enrich the hearts and minds of those who read them. Many people are involved each year in the production of our lecture book. My sincere thanks and appreciation goes to all who helped in this process, including the men in the Department of Biblical Studies at Florida College who planned the program, the speakers who wrote the manuscripts, Dr. Ward and the Marketing Department for the typesetting and design of the book, and Stephen Blaylock and Carrie Black for the management of the publication process.

David McClister

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Florida College

Common Abbreviations

AD	<i>anno domini</i> (year of our Lord)
BC	before Christ
ed.	editor, edition
<i>Ibid.</i>	<i>ibidem</i> (in the same place)
<i>c.</i> or <i>ca.</i>	<i>circa</i> (about)
<i>cf.</i>	<i>confer</i> (compare)
<i>e.g.</i>	<i>exempli gratia</i> (for example)
f	following verse
ff	following verses
<i>i.e.</i>	<i>id est</i> (that is)
<i>etc.</i>	<i>et cetera</i> (and so on)
fn	footnote
p.	page
pp.	pages
v	verse
vv	verses
vol.	volume

Bible Versions and Reference Works

AB	Anchor Bible (Anchor Yale Bible Commentary)
ANF	Ante-Nicene Fathers
b.	Babylonian Talmud
BAGD	Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich Lexicon, 2 nd ed.
BDAG	Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich Lexicon, 3 rd ed.
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the NT
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentary
CBQ	Catholic Biblical Quarterly

CJB	Complete Jewish Bible
CSB	Christian Standard Bible
DSB	Daily Study Bible
EBC	Expositor's Bible Commentary
ESV	English Standard Version
ExpT	Expository Times
HALOT	Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament, Koehler-Baumgartner
HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible
HTR	Harvard Theological Review
ICC	International Critical Commentary
JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature
JETS	Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society
JSNT	Journal for the Study of the New Testament
JTS	Journal of Theological Studies
KJV	King James Version
LXX	Septuagint
m.	Mishnah
NAC	New American Commentary
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary
NDSB	New Daily Study Bible
NET	New English Translation
NIB	New Interpreter's Bible
NICNT	New International Commentary on the NT
NIGNT	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version
NIVAC	The NIV Application Commentary
NKJV	New King James Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NTS	New Testament Studies
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
ResQ	Restoration Quarterly
SBLSP	Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers
SNTSMS	Society of New Testament Studies Monograph Series

TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentary
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
ZECNT	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT

Books of the Bible

Gen	Genesis
Exod	Exodus
Lev	Leviticus
Num	Numbers
Deut	Deuteronomy
Josh	Joshua
Jdg	Judges
Ruth	Ruth
1 Sam	1 Samuel
2 Sam	2 Samuel
1 Kng	1 Kings
2 Kng	2 Kings
1 Chr	1 Chronicles
2 Chr	2 Chronicles
Ezra	Ezra
Neh	Nehemiah
Est	Esther
Job	Job
Psa	Psalms
Prov	Proverbs
Eccl	Ecclesiastes
Song	Song of Solomon
Isa	Isaiah
Jer	Jeremiah
Lam	Lamentations
Ezek	Ezekiel
Dan	Daniel
Hos	Hosea
Joel	Joel
Amos	Amos
Obad	Obadiah

Jon	Jonah
Mic	Micah
Nah	Nahum
Hab	Habakkuk
Zeph	Zephaniah
Hag	Haggai
Zech	Zechariah
Mal	Malachi
Matt	Matthew
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
John	John
Acts	Acts
Rom	Romans
1 Cor	1 Corinthians
2 Cor	2 Corinthians
Gal	Galatians
Eph	Ephesians
Phili	Philippians
Col	Colossians
1 Thes	1 Thessalonians
2 Thes	2 Thessalonians
1 Tim	1 Timothy
2 Tim	2 Timothy
Titus	Titus
Phlm	Philemon
Heb	Hebrews
Jam	James
1 Pet	1 Peter
2 Pet	2 Peter
1 John	1 John
2 John	2 John
3 John	3 John
Jude	Jude
Rev	Revelation

Part One

The Evening Lectures

How Will You Understand All the Parables?

The Parable of the Sower

Edwin L. Crozier

“Throughout much of the church’s history the parables of Jesus have been mistreated, rearranged, abused, and butchered. Often they still are today. They are *used* more than they are heard and understood.”¹ To that, I say, “Amen.” Parables must be heard. Therefore, when Jesus ended His foundational parable, the Parable of the Sower, He exclaimed: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Matt 13:9; Luke 8:8).²

A sower casts seed on the pathway where birds eat it, on rocks where plants are doomed to wither, among weeds where the seed is choked, and on good ground where it produces fruit. The soils represent hearers. One does not hear. One hears, but not really. One hears, but is distracted by other voices. One truly hears (Matt 13:1–23; Mark 4:1–20; Luke 8:4–15). The Sower is so fundamental to hearing, when asked what it means, Jesus responds, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?” (Mark 4:13). We study the Sower first because we not only need to hear it, but to learn how to hear from it.

¹Klyne R. Snodgrass, “Modern Approaches to Parables,” in *The Face of New Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Research*, ed. Scot McKnight and Grant R. Osborne (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 177.

²All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted are from The ESV Bible. *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001). Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Hearing Parables

“A parable is one of the stories in the Bible which sounds at first like a pleasant yarn but keeps something up its sleeve which pops up and leaves you flat.”³ Perhaps, many of us are so accustomed to parables and our explanations, they have become flat instead of leaving us flat. Parables are earthly stories with heavenly meanings, we hear. However, there is more to it than just laying a spiritual meaning alongside an earthly experience. We often accept without question that parables borrow a story from everyday life to make a spiritual point.⁴ No doubt, some parables do (e.g. the parables of leaven, the dragnet, and the growing seed). However, usually the point of a parable lies in the uncommon part that gets pulled out of the sleeve. Is it common to find a pearl of such value that someone will sell everything he has to buy it? What good would the pearl do? Could he feed it to his kids? Was it actually the common, ordinary, everyday experience of Palestinian farmers to broadcast seeds everywhere without thought to the ground?

Even those who see the conventional in the parables admit the unconventional drives the message. Grant Osborne, after saying the common denominator of parables is comparing a kingdom truth to an everyday experience, asserts Jesus’s major means of forcing a decision was to break convention. A totally unexpected turn of events, a reversal of norms, startled the hearers, forcing them to consider deeper implications of how kingdom reality runs counter to world culture.⁵ Another commentator claims Jesus draws on common experience, but observes: “Parables are often deeply, even frustratingly, perplexing, because the story may take

³ Archibald M. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 14. Attributing this to a P. G. Wodehouse character, he gives no citation. The closest I have seen is in *The Coming of Bill*, chapter 5 (accessed on Google Books without page numbers). Steve Dingle says, “It’s a—what d’you call it when you pull something that’s got another meaning tucked up its sleeve?” Kirk Winfield responds, “A parable.” Special thanks to Julie Gant and David Gant for finding this.

⁴ Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2006), 292.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 299.

an unexpected turn and cause offense to the audience when personal application is made.”⁶

Parables do interlock the hearer with the message by “conceding” a point to the hearer’s life experience while employing a double meaning to switch from the listener’s perspective to the kingdom reality.⁷ What prompts a search for that meaning? Not the everyday experience, but the everyday experience turned on its head. Jesus pulled a reversal of expectations out of His sleeve, transforming His story from the pleasant yarn it seemed to the knockout punch it was.

Historically and throughout Old and New Testament the word “parable” is applied to the following kinds of literature: proverbs (Luke 4:23), metaphors (Matt 15:13), similes (Matt 10:16), short comparisons (Matt 13:31f, 33), longer implied analogies (Luke 11:5–8; 15:3–7), figurative sayings (Luke 5:36–38), similitudes/more developed similes (Mark 4:30–32).⁸ We tend to think of the following: story parables (Matt 25:1–13—the comparison takes the form of fictional narrative), example stories (Luke 10:29–37—the parable is a model for proper conduct), allegorical parables (Mark 4:1–9, 13–20—several points of comparison are drawn).⁹

The last on Osborne’s list troubles us. In order to combat some of the silly allegorizing by ancient Bible students, it became common to claim parables have only one point, one line of comparison, whereas allegories have multiple.¹⁰ Jesus’s interpretation of the Sower seems more like an allegory. Yet, He calls it a parable (Matt 13:18). We do not need to fear seeing a parable as a form of allegory if we keep in mind “There is a difference between *allegory*, a literary device in which the author draws the reader into a deeper and intended level of meaning, and *allegorizing*, in which levels of meaning (never intended) are read into the text. The former is true

⁶ Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 473.

⁷ Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 295.

⁸ See LXX use of “parable” in Deuteronomy 28:7; 1 Samuel 10:12; 2 Samuel 23:3; 1 Kings 5:12; Proverbs 1:6.

⁹ Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 292.

¹⁰ Albert Edward Barnett, *Understanding the Parables of Our Lord* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1940), 12.

of the Gospel parables, but not the latter.”¹¹ Yes, we should avoid the rampant allegorizing attempt to turn every detail of a story into a kingdom comparison. However, we should also avoid inventing interpretation rules to manipulate students to draw the conclusions we want. Like it or not, the rule for interpreting allegorical comparisons of parables, as in the Sower, is not that they have one comparison, one point, one interpretive principle. The rule is interpret them the way the teller intended. When we go beyond what was intended, we add to the Word (Prov 30.5f). Interpreting parables is art, not science. The art critic, in this case, is not free to decide what it means, but only to discover what the original Artist intended. Study a parable not to say what it means to you, but to hear what the story-teller meant for you.

Parables for the Hard of Hearing

“When God sees fit to punish a man he first takes away his good sense.”¹² A shocking bit of homespun wisdom by Tevye the Dairyman. Yet, it is an accurate expression of Jesus’s response when asked why He used parables. “For to one who has, more will be given...but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away” (Matt 13:12). Most believe Jesus used parables to get down on His audience’s level, connect with them where they live, clarify His message. That explanation, however, is the exact opposite of Jesus’s explanation. If parables clarified, why did the apostles ask what this one meant (Luke 8:9)? Why did they question Jesus’s use of parables at all (Matt 13:10)?

Ezekiel 20:49 explains, at least in part, the apostles’ struggle. Ezekiel complains, “Ah, Lord God! They are saying of me, ‘Is he not a maker of parables?’ That is, “Lord, no one believes me. They think these are nothing but parables. They do not make sense to anyone.” The unspoken question is, “Why are You having me speak to them in parables?” This same struggle is behind the apostles’ question. “Why are You teaching like this? Folks will not

¹¹ Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 294.

¹² Sholem Aliechem, “The Bubble Bursts,” in *Tevye’s Daughters: Collected Stories of Sholom Aliechem*, trans. F. Butwin (Manhattan: Crown Publishing, 1945), 1.

listen to You or understand You. They will think You are nothing more than a maker of parables.”

Matthew records Jesus’s shocking response (Matt 13:11–16). Jesus used parables because 1) it has not been given to them to know the kingdom secrets; 2) they are the have-nots, I am taking away what they have; 3) no matter how plainly I speak or act, they refuse to see or hear; 4) they are like Isaiah’s audience, blind and deaf, and will therefore receive judgment instead of healing. In other words, “I am ready to punish them, so I am taking away their good sense.” To support His claims, He quotes Isaiah 6:9f (Septuagint, hereafter LXX).¹³

To understand Isaiah 6:9f, consider Psalm 115:4–8 (see also Psa 135:15–18):

Their idols are silver and gold,
the work of human hands.
They have mouths, but do not speak;
eyes, but do not see.
They have ears, but do not hear;
noses, but do not smell.
They have hands, but do not feel;
feet, but do not walk;
and they do not make a sound in their throat.
Those who make them become like them;
so do all who trust in them.

Idolaters become like idols—blind and deaf. “We resemble what we revere, either for ruin or restoration.”¹⁴

Judgment against idolatry begins with becoming like the idol, which leads to all other aspects of judgment. Yes, falling into the pit is God’s judgment on the blind, but judgment begins as the follower becomes like his blind leader (Matt 15:14). In Isaiah 6, God was not warning against a future judgment, but explaining judgment had already begun. The house of Jacob was “filled with idols. They bow down to the work of their hands...” (Isa 2:8). They bowed down

¹³ Quotes attributed to LXX are taken from Lancelot C. Brenton, ed., *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976).

¹⁴ Gregory K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 22.

to that which had unseeing eyes and unhearing ears; they were themselves becoming blind and deaf. Isaiah's teaching, though intended to produce repentance, would actually promote further rebellion, leading Isaiah's audience to deserve judgment more. Isaiah was to keep teaching, though his audience would not repent, until the judgment was completed and "cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and the Lord removes people far away" (Isa 6:11f).

Jesus's audience, like Isaiah's, were idolaters, though without the statuary. Of course, idolatry does not require statuary. Samuel rebuked King Saul, saying, "Presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you" (1 Sam 15:23).¹⁵ In Matthew 15:3–9, Jesus claims His audience made void the Word of God for the sake of their traditions and then applies another Isaianic idolatry rebuke to them (Isa 29:9–16, esp. v 13; cf. Mark 7:1–13). When Jesus began teaching consistently in parables (Matt 13:34; Mark 4:33f), His audience was rejecting the Lord's Word. In fact, Matthew and Mark both place the Sower just after the accusation that Jesus was casting out demons by the prince of demons (Matt 12:22–32; Mark 3:22–30). The first time Mark uses the word "parable" describes how Jesus taught in response to this accusation (Mark 3:23). How could anyone witness Jesus casting out demons, but miss who Jesus is? The answer is in Isaiah 6:9f. Jesus's audience were idolaters who had already developed unseeing eyes and unhearing ears. How did Jesus respond? By turning to parables. G. H. Lang explains:

By the time in the ministry of Christ to which Matt. 12 and 13 brings us the leaders and the people as a whole had hardened their hearts against Him and His message. At this stage His form of public instruction became principally parabolic; and, in reply to the inquiry of His disciples why this was so, He quoted the words of God to Isaiah just given [Isaiah 6:9f]. The moral hardness and blindness of the people had become again as in Isaiah's day and the righteous and judicial dealing of God could not but correspond.¹⁶

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹⁶ G. H. Lang, *The Parabolic Teaching of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 58–9.

Jesus's audience was as idolatrous as Isaiah's. Judgment was not coming in the future; it had already begun. They were becoming like their idols: blind and deaf (Psa 115:4–8; 135:15–18; Isa 6:9f), stubborn and false (2 Kng 17:14f), worthless and vain (Jer 2:5). Though Jesus's teaching, like Isaiah's, was intended to produce repentance, it would harden them more, increasing their blindness not for lack of light but because of the light's brightness. Jesus was punishing them; the parables were a means to take away their good sense. In this we discover a kingdom truth we may find hard to accept: God allows those who rebel against Him to further their blindness. He does give them up to it, letting it have its own natural effects, leading them to more sin and closer to the pit, making them more worthy of judgment, condemnation, and punishment (see Rom 1:24, 26, 28). When folks refuse to love the truth and be saved by it, God will not shield them from the deluding power of Satan and even "sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned" (2 Thes 2:9–12). In our haste to properly assuage the fears of modern disciples afraid they have committed blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, an unforgiveable sin, or some sin for which God will refuse to forgive them, let us not lose sight of the warning we must maintain. God will forgive every sin of which we repent, but it is possible to pass a point of no return. Not because God will not allow return, but because God will not force it and will give us up to the slippery slope of our idolatry. The more we say no to God, the harder it becomes to say yes. It will never be easier than today for you to repent and hear Jesus. God will not yank us off that path; if we push away from Him, He will push back. That is why Jesus taught in parables.

That dark, blinding side, however, is not the whole of parables. There is also a sight-giving, enlightening side. Mark and Luke follow up the Sower with the Parable of the Lamp (Mark 4:21–25; Luke 8:16–18). While Matthew employed Jesus's statement about the haves and have-nots to emphasize those who were being blinded (Matt 13:12), Mark and Luke emphasize those who were being enlightened, making it part of the Lamp Parable (Mark 4:25; Luke 8:18). In other words, though Jesus turned to parables as the begin-

ning of judgment on the idolatrous blind, that was not the outcome for everyone. It was not the outcome for the apostles. Rather than dismissing Jesus as a maker of parables and ignoring His teaching as pleasant yarns, they realize there is more to these stories than meets the ear and ask Jesus for explanation. Jesus explains.

Thus, the parables are a means of judging those who refuse truth. However, Jesus never intended any of His teaching to be ultimately secretive and covered up, but meant for those who will be open to it to be enlightened. After all, how silly it is to put a lamp under a basket.

The purpose of the parables was to reveal the hidden truths of God's Kingdom, but not to everyone. To the honest heart these illustrative stories would bring further light, but to the proud and rebellious they would increase confusion (Matt 13:11–17)...The gospel of the kingdom is so fashioned as to attract and inform the humble while it drives off and confuses the proud. Hearing the word of God is a dynamic experience. We will be either the better or the worse for it. The same sun that melts the wax hardens the clay. But that is the choice the student, not the teacher, makes.¹⁷

The key to understanding the parables is not to have a pre-ordained insight kept from everyone else. The apostles did not automatically understand the parables. They distinguished themselves by asking. G. Campbell Morgan, therefore, defines a parable as “the open door to the mystery. If men will consider the picture, and enquire, He will always answer.”¹⁸ Of course, Jesus is no longer physically present. We cannot ask Jesus to verbally explain the parables. However, there are two things we can do to follow in the footsteps of the apostles, distinguishing ourselves from the blind and deaf: 1) immerse ourselves in God's Word and 2) pray.

While commentaries, books, and articles are helpful, the greatest tool for interpreting the parables is God's Word. The parables are not the only means God used to reveal the mysteries of His kingdom.

¹⁷ Paul Earnhart, *Glimpses of Eternity* (Chillicothe, OH: DeWard Publishing, 2012), 8–9. See also Wilkins, *Matthew*, 478–9.

¹⁸ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Parables and Metaphors of Our Lord* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1943), 17.

The modern student cannot simply assert a meaning for a parable unless the student can defend it from the rest of God's Word. Parables do not give us new information, but are narratives embedded in the larger story to repeat and confirm what is taught elsewhere.¹⁹

While we immerse ourselves in God's Word, we must surround our study with prayer. "The hearing ear and the seeing eye, the Lord has made them both" (Prov 20:12). In Deuteronomy 29:2–4, Moses said, "You have seen all that the Lord did before your eyes...But to this day the Lord has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear." In the context of Deuteronomy, (see especially Deut 4:9, 31, 33, 35f), Moses was not claiming it was impossible for Israel to understand unless God worked a miracle in their heart, eyes, and ears. They, as on Sinai, blinded themselves, forgetting what they had seen. Here, God lays the groundwork for what we learned above. When people blind themselves, God will not force the light into their heart. However, in our haste to keep from blaming God for Israel's sin, let us not miss the way Moses worded it. Therefore, let us remember where the seeing eye and the hearing ear come from. As the apostles sought to gain understanding from Jesus and asked Him for it, let us seek to gain understanding from God and ask Him for it.

Hearing the Sower

The background of the Sower is not everyday life, but God's prophets. Long before Jesus, they declared God a sower (Jer 31:27; Ezek 36:9; Hos 2:23).²⁰ Additionally, Jesus's use of Isaiah points to the powerful background that particular prophet provides this parable.

As the Sower begins with the pathway soil who do not understand, Isaiah begins with "Israel does not know, my people do not understand" (Isa 1:3). In Isaiah 5, the metaphor is slightly different (we see a vineyard, not a grain field), but the similarities are pro-

¹⁹ Warren Carter, "Challenging by Confirming, Renewing by Repeating: The Parables of 'the Reign of the Heavens' in Matthew 13 as Embedded Narratives," in *SBLSP* 1995, ed. Eugene H. Lovering, Jr. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 399–424.

²⁰ Peter Rhea Jones, *The Teaching of the Parables* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1982), 72.

found. God, the vinedresser, cleared it of rocks and planted choice vines. However, instead of good grapes, it produced thorns (LXX). Because it produced thorns, God would allow it to be trampled down (pathway soil). Finally, God will not prune or hoe it, but give it over to the thorns and briers. Following Isaiah's parable of the vineyard, we read God's commission of Isaiah, with which Jesus explained His own parabolic teaching.

Throughout Isaiah, the language of judgment is the language of farming, the very language Jesus used in the Sower. What does God do with thorns? He cuts them down and burns them (Isa 33:10–12). When God wants to judge a nation, He withers them like grass (Isa 15:6). Sometimes, the plants grow up quickly, but then the harvest flees away (Isa 17:10f). God shows His superiority over princes, explaining they are scarcely sown before He blows on them and they wither (Isa 40:24).²¹ Can you hear the Sower in these?

The language of restoration in Isaiah is also that of farming. Isaiah returns to the vineyard in Isaiah 27:2–6. This time it is protected and watered and without thorns. "In the days to come Jacob shall take root, Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots and fill the whole world with fruit." In Isaiah 29:17f, not only will the day of restoration bring fruitfulness, it will cause blind eyes to see and deaf ears to hear.²² The glorious picture of Jesus's Year of Jubilee is that of a garden that "causes what is sown in it to sprout up" (Isa 61:11).²³

Most importantly, the hinge between judgment and restoration in Isaiah is the Word of God (Isa 40:6f). The key passage tying the Sower to Isaiah is 55:10–13:²⁴

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,

²¹ Cf. Isaiah 7:23–25; 9:18; 10:17; 14:30; 16:9f; 18:5; 19:7; 32:12f.

²² For more on blinded vs. seeing and deaf vs. hearing, cf. Isaiah 1:10, 15; 28:9–13, 23–26; 29:9f; 30:9–11, 20–23; 32:3f; 35:5; 42:16, 18–25; 43:8; 44:18; 48:8; 50:4–6; 51:4; 52:15.

²³ Cf. Isaiah 4:2; 30:23; 37:31; 44:3; 45:8.

²⁴ Craig A. Evans, "On the Isaianic Background of the Sower Parable," *CBQ* 47 (1985): 464–68.

Making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
But it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.
For you shall go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
The mountains and the hills before you
shall break forth into singing,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
And it shall make a name for the Lord,
an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Jesus's deaf hearers did not catch the echoes of Isaiah. We must. God promised a fruitful restoration following the withering judgment. However, is anyone convinced the ancient return and rebuilding projects under Zerubbabel, Joshua, and Nehemiah completely fulfilled those prophecies? There was no return of the Shekinah, no outpouring of the Spirit, no real freedom. Israel had survived, but only just. Even in Jesus's day, Israel was an enslaved nation. However, God had promised. Along comes Jesus preaching, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:14). Was now the time of the fruitful restoration? Despite the popularity of Jesus's miracles, the teaching did not seem to be gaining as much traction. Jesus would gain followers and then lose them just as quickly (John 6). Those who stayed were not promising. Even John was compelled to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another" (Luke 7:20). Jesus's answer, by the way, was to show how He was fulfilling Isaiah (Luke 7:21–23; Isa 61:1f). In the midst of this, Jesus teaches the parable of the Sower. The message? God's Word does what it is supposed to. God's Promises are coming true in Jesus no matter what it looks like at the moment. Though it falls on trampled pathways, rocky ground, and weed-infested soil, it will produce the bumper crop. The thorns and briars will make way

for cypress and the myrtle. The barren waste will become a fruitful field and the fruitful field will become a forest. That is how amazing the seed of God's Word is.

Yet, what does Jesus call this parable? Not the Parable of the Seed. Further, despite the manifold wisdom of so many modern commentators claiming it is really the Parable of the Soils,²⁵ He does not call it that either. Jesus calls it the Parable of the Sower (Matt 13:18). Why? Because the sower is the unexpected turn of events breaking convention. This sower is crazy. Everyone recognizes the sower is behaving oddly. However, having bought in to the idea that all these stories come from everyday experiences, many go to great lengths to say he was behaving normally for an ancient Palestinian.²⁶ Do we actually need other commentators to contest this before we hold up our hands in protest?²⁷ Are we expected to believe anyone, anywhere, anytime sowed so recklessly? The exact opposite is happening in this parable than most believe. This is no normal farmer who scatters the seed mostly on the good ground but some happens to end up on poor soil. Rather, he scatters the seed so recklessly, how could some not also happen to fall on good ground. "Surely he is heading for disaster!"²⁸ Yet...

²⁵R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 503; David L. Turner, *Matthew*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 337.

²⁶Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, trans. S. Hooke (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), 11–12. "It is noteworthy, for instance, that the sower in Mark 4.3–8 sows so clumsily that much of the seed is wasted; one might have expected a description of the regular method of sowing, and that, in fact, is what we have here. This is easily understood when we remember that in Palestine sowing precedes ploughing. Hence, in the parable the sower is depicted as striding over the unploughed stubble, and this enables us to understand why he sows 'on the path': he sows intentionally on the path which the villagers have trodden over the stubble, since he intends to plough the seed in when he ploughs up the path. He sows intentionally among the thorns standing withered in the fallow because they, too, will be ploughed up. Nor need it surprise us that some grains should fall upon rocky ground; the underlying limestone, thinly covered with soil, barely shows above the surface until the ploughshare jars against it. What appears to the western mind as bad farming is simply customary usage under Palestinian conditions."

²⁷John Drury, *The Parables in the Gospels* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1985), 55–58. Drury refutes Jeremias's footnoted supports one by one. He ably explains even if every bit of Jeremias's evidence were true, it does not help his case. Rather, it makes the story even more ridiculous.

²⁸John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 526.

The one who looked like a stupid farmer heading for disaster turns out to be a farmer who apparently knew something that the hearers of the story did not know...Looking back from the end, the central dynamic of the story is provided by the carefree sowing of a farmer who, because of the extraordinary potential of the seed he has, has no need to be parsimonious with his precious seed grain.²⁹

Considering the facts that Jesus's opponents were accusing Him of being demon-possessed, His family thought He was out of His mind, the crowds who followed Him one day would abandon Him the next, it almost makes one wonder why the apostles asked "Why do you speak to them in parables?" instead of asking, "Why do you speak to them at all?" The Sower answers that question: the Sower believes in the power of the seed.

However, we must not miss the twofold point behind this. There is the positive, powerful message of victory. Some seed may fall on the wayside, on the rock, among the weeds. This seed will be rejected. In fact, the rejection may be so strong that the birds of the air turn on the Sower, attacking Him, nailing Him to a cross so that the incarnate Word is sown in the ground. It may seem like tragedy, disaster, and destruction, like all the seed has been wasted, like the Sower was out of His mind. Not so. God's Word will not return to Him void. The Kingdom was at hand. The time was fulfilled. The restoration was happening. The roots would go down and the fruit would come up. Jesus was sown in the ground, but He burst forth in resurrection. God did pour out His Spirit. Righteousness did rain down. The kingdom was established and continues to bear fruit. Those who continue to allow the Word to be sown in their hearts do bear fruit and will be healed. What a crop it has and continues to produce. However, there is the negative, frightening message of judgment. The trampling, scorching, withering, devouring on the other three soils are just as certain. These are not convenient images filling out the story. These are borrowed images of judgment on idolaters who reject the Word. The grass withers but the Word of God endures. The grain that grows from roots in the Word endures, all else is trampled underfoot, withers, or is scorched in the fire.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 529.

In the end, there are only two types of soil: 1) the soil that hears Jesus and 2) the idolater. There are idolaters who are so deaf the seed cannot penetrate their hard heads and hard hearts (*cf.* Ezek 3:7). There are the idolaters who grant some space to Jesus in their pantheon. Yet, for one, when Jesus asks too much, too difficult, too painful, the god of self pushes Him out. For the other, when Jesus's present blessings do not measure up, the distracted pursuit of other gods' promises lead him away from the One, True, Living God.

The Word of God will do exactly what God said. Will we hear it or will we make it void by our own personal idols?

Hearing the Parable of the Sower in Each Gospel

Not only should we hear the general message of the Sower, we also need to hear the specific messages each gospel author intended to convey. We do not want to be guilty of emptying the tellings of this parable from the books in which we find them. "When the unit is detached from its home ground it has to go somewhere. So the milieu of the meaning will now be one's own experience—if there is a sermon on the lesson it is likely to take it that way—or perhaps in some generalized reconstruction of Jesus' teaching, or both."³⁰

In Matthew: the Radical King of a Radical Kingdom

Matthew's great concern is the "kingdom of heaven."³¹ Matthew employs the Sower to carry on that theme. In Mark and Luke, Jesus tells the apostles it has been given to them to know the secret of the kingdom of God (Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10). In Matthew, it is the secrets of the kingdom of heaven (Matt 13:11). In Mark, the sower sows the word (Mark 4:14); in Luke, the word of God (Luke 8:11). In Matthew, the hearers hear the "word of the kingdom" (Matt 13:19). Which kingdom? He does not have to repeat that it is the aforementioned kingdom of heaven.

When we consider the Isaianic background of this parable and its connection to Isaiah 55:10ff, we remember Isaiah 55:8f: "For

³⁰Drury, *The Parables in the Gospels*, 1.

³¹A phrase found 31 times in Matthew and not once in the other gospels.

my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” In Matthew, the kingdom is the kingdom of heaven. The thoughts of its King will be different from our thoughts. The ways of this kingdom will be different from our ways. It will be a radical kingdom.

That is exactly what the Sower demonstrates. It is no accident Matthew is the one who records the name “Parable of the Sower” (Matt 13:18), focusing on the radical methods of this farmer. A radically reckless farmer grows a radical crop. That, however, is how the kingdom of heaven works. It works in ways we would never expect. Its King employs methods we would never expect. He sows on the pathway, on the rocks, and among the weeds. What a subtle layer that produces in this parable. Who are the pathway, rocky ground, and weedy soil hearers to whom Jesus preached? No doubt, the Pharisees and scribes, had they heard this explanation, would know exactly who fit that bill: prostitutes, tax collectors, sinners. Surely it would include all those blind, deaf, lame, demon-possessed people whose deformities demonstrated they were already judged by God, right? Why would Jesus even talk to them? Only a radical would eat with them, meet with them, and let them touch Him. Yet, the radical nature of the kingdom explains these are the very people who end up being good soil as seen in Matthew 21:28–22:14 (the Parables of the Two Sons, the Tenants of the Vineyard, and the Wedding Feast). Do not miss Jesus’s statement smack in the middle of these three parables: “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.” However, we did not have to wait to hear the parables to know this. Is this not exactly what Jesus had said in Matthew 8:5–13? When the centurion demonstrated a faith in Jesus and His Word greater than all the Jews together, Jesus said, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown

into the outer darkness.” Then Jesus turned to the centurion: “Go; let it be done for you as you have believed.’ And the servant was healed at that very moment.” Remember, those being judged by the parables were not going to be healed (Matt 13:15). Yet, this Gentile’s servant was healed because the centurion understood exactly what it meant for Jesus to say something. He understood Jesus’s Word must be heard and heeded.

No matter the world culture, Jesus’s kingdom has been and will always be counter-cultural. It is made up of people you would not expect, employs methods you would not expect, calls for commitments you would not expect, grants rewards you would never expect. The sower appears crazy, the King appears radical. His thoughts, ways, and words are not yours. Will you surrender your words, ways, and thoughts to Him? Those with radical ears to hear, let us hear.

In Mark: The Radical Attributes of the Good Soil

No doubt, if there is good soil that produced fruit a hundred-fold, it would have to be the apostles, right? Obviously. However, if Matthew demonstrated a radical King over a radical kingdom, Mark demonstrates the radically shocking nature of those who end up being the good soil. For most of Mark’s gospel account, they look like the other three soils.

Most of what Mark records is found in the other synoptics, so perhaps the struggle of the apostles only stands out because so much else is stripped away. However, by the time we are done reading Mark’s account, it almost looks like he is actually arguing against the apostles. Further, the Sower fits smack in the middle of this theme, outlining the case against them.

While the apostles question the parable in all three accounts, Mark calls special attention to their misunderstanding. In Mark 4:10–13, “those around him with the twelve” ask Jesus about the parables. Jesus divides His hearers into insiders and outsiders, demonstrating the apostles as insiders, saying, “To you has been given the secret.” Those on the outside will not understand even though they have heard. Then Jesus says to these supposed in-

siders, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?”³² Are the apostles insiders given the secrets or outsiders who do not understand? Mark calls this outsider description to mind again in two places. First, in Mark 6:51f, the apostles are utterly astounded at Jesus walking on the water and stopping the wind. Only Mark claims this is because “they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.” Second, in Mark 8:17f, the apostles misunderstood the two feeding miracles. Jesus asks them, “Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?” When Matthew records this story, he only records Jesus asking, “Do you not yet perceive?” (Matt 16:9). Mark is calling to mind the Sower and Isaiah 6:9f; the apostles are not looking like insiders or good soil.

In Mark, the Sower outlines the coming responses from the apostles themselves.³³ Immediately after Jesus rebukes the apostles for being blind, He heals a blind man in two stages. Then we read Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Christ (Mark 8:29). For one shining moment, it seems Peter sees. However, he is half-blind. In the next paragraph, Peter rebukes Jesus for prophesying His own death. Jesus responds, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man” (Mark 8:33). There is a subtle difference between Matthew’s telling and Mark’s.³⁴ In Matthew’s telling, Jesus merely “turned and said to Peter” (Matt 16:23). In Mark’s, Jesus, “turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter” (Mark 8:33). Jesus rebukes Peter because of the impact he is having on the apostles. Peter is not merely pathway soil; he is a bird. His lack of understanding is tak-

³² An argument might be made that the word translated “understand” in 4:12 and the one similarly translated in 4:13 are different Greek words. That is true. However, imagine the following statement that might be spoken by a modern English Literature professor: “Only uncivilized swine don’t understand Shakespeare. If you don’t get *Romeo and Juliet*, how are you going to know the rest of Shakespeare?” We read three terms with semantic overlap—understand, get, know. However, the speaker is not referring to different kinds of understanding. For more on this, see Donald Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 47–55.

³³ Drury *The Parables in the Gospels*, 51.

³⁴ This part of the story is not included in Luke.

ing understanding away from the others. In the Sower, those sown on rocky ground are the ones who because of tribulation and persecution fall away. In Mark 14:26–31, Jesus foretold that all the apostles would fall away. Peter argued with Him, “and they all said the same.” However, when the crowd with swords and clubs came to arrest Jesus, “They all left him and fled” (Mark 14:50). They fell away as Jesus predicted when tribulation and persecution arose. The apostles were stony soil.³⁵ Of course, Judas fulfills the thorny soil in Mark 14:10f, betraying Jesus for money.³⁶

There is so much more through Mark that can be said about the struggles and misunderstandings of the apostles. Though he gives hints of what the apostles will become (see Mark 1:16; 10:39; 13:9–13), Mark presents the apostles as the bad soils almost until the end. Yet, clearly the apostles are good soil. The Word sunk deep into their hearts and grew up to bear fruit some thirty, some sixty, some a hundredfold.

This highlights the shocking attributes of kingdom citizens. They are not the wealthy, the scholarly, the religious elite. They often mess up, stumble, fall, and fail. Many times, it is hard to distinguish them from the pathway, rocky, and thorny soils. They often have to be rebuked and challenged. They always have room to grow even in those moments when they have been most successful. What distinguishes the good soil from the bad? Or maybe

³⁵In Mark 14:51–52, Mark includes an odd occurrence. “And a young man followed him, with nothing but a linen cloth about his body. And they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked.” William Lane suggests this alludes to Amos 2:16: “And he who is stout of heart among the mighty shall flee away naked in that day.” Notice this statement finishes a prophetic argument that began by saying “For three transgressions and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they sell the righteous for silver...” (Amos 2:6). If Lane is correct about Mark’s allusion to Amos 2:16, and it is the most plausible reason I have read given for the inclusion of this event, then Mark indicates when the rest of the disciples fell away like rocky ground hearers, they were qualitatively like Judas who had actually sold the righteous for silver. William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 527.

³⁶Drury, from whom I have followed this line of reasoning, uses the fellow we often call the rich, young ruler as his example of this fulfillment (Mark 10:17–22). No doubt, he does appear as that thorny soil also. Yet, I believe Mark intends us to see the apostles specifically fulfilling the three bad soils. Seeing Judas Iscariot as the fulfillment of this soil makes the same point noted above in fn. 35. Judas was, no doubt, bad soil, but the other apostles were in the same boat.

we should ask what takes bad soil and makes it good (as seems to have happened with the apostles)? Which shatters the idea that each person is born a particular soil and cannot break free from that pre-ordained destiny. Mark answers this question in the two parables that follow the Sower—the Lamp and the Growing Seed. The apostles ended up being the exact opposite of the Pharisees who had knowledge, understanding, but did not listen to Jesus. What they had was taken away, and the parables themselves were a means of accomplishing that. The apostles, however, did not understand. They were not educated and knowledgeable. However, they listened to Jesus (*cf.* Acts 4:13). Even when they did not understand, they listened to Jesus. Even when they did not see clearly, but saw men looking like trees walking, they listened to Jesus. They asked. They heard. They listened. They made mistakes, yes. However, they kept listening to the Word of Jesus. Thus, even the parables became for them a means of growth, understanding, and revelation of the mysteries. Perhaps the greatest mystery is the one we will like least. That is, we cannot explain the shift. We do not know how the seed works. Could the apostles even explain how they moved from hard-hearted pathway soil, scandalized rocky soil, distracted thorny soil to becoming the fruitful good soil? Probably not. Except to say this. The reason why the radical Sower sows so recklessly is because the seed is just that powerful. The Word He sows (Mark 1:14) is the power of God to produce salvation, to plow pathways, to remove rocks, to pluck out the thorns. The apostles (save Judas) listened. They heard. They heeded.

You may believe you could never be like the apostles. You could never be a Peter, Andrew, James, or John. Maybe you look at your life now and see too much hardness, too many rocks, too many thorns. Yet, even these soils when they truly hear the Word of God can be plowed, cleared, and weeded. They can be transformed into faithful, humble, forgiving servants. Those who have ears to hear, though we are hard of hearing, let us hear.

Luke: The Radical Preparation for the Kingdom

Luke treats the Sower differently than Matthew and Mark. The first two gospels let the Sower be a thematic response to the accusation that Jesus cast out demons by the prince of demons and that He was out of His mind. Luke employs the parable in a different context to make a different point. Additionally, while Matthew and Mark embed the Sower parable as part of the main themes of their entire accounts, Luke appears to be making a subpoint.

The key is how Luke defines the seed. In Matthew, the seed is the word of the kingdom (Matt 13:18). In Mark, merely the word (Mark 4:14). In Luke, “the seed is the word of God” (Luke 8:11). In Matthew and Mark, we are left to draw a logical conclusion to define the seed. Luke, however, makes sure we know exactly what the seed represents.

The synoptics do not mention the “word of God” often. Matthew and Mark only use it in the account of the scribes and Pharisees voiding the Word of God by idolizing their traditions (Matt 15:6; Mark 7:13). However, the few times Luke uses the phrase provide a powerful picture. The next time “word of God” appears is Luke 8:19–21. First, recognize Luke changes the order of this event. In Matthew and Mark, this statement about Jesus’s family is part of the “out of his mind” story before the parable. Luke, has chosen to move it after the parable in which he explains the Word of God is the seed. Jesus says, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.” It is a subtle difference, but Matthew records Jesus saying, “Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matt 12:50). Mark records it simply as “whoever does the will of God” (Mark 3:35). Luke wants His reader to see the connection to the seed just verses earlier. Who is Jesus’s family? The good soil.

As modern westerners, the above connection is a charming metaphor. “Yes, yes, we all need a church family.” However, Jesus was not a modern westerner, nor was He speaking to modern westerners. E. Randolph Richards and Brandon O’Brien explain the importance of this distinction. First, they show why Jesus’s statement is merely quaint to us.

Western societies are, by and large, individualistic societies. The most important entity in an individualistic culture is the individual person. The person's identity comes by distinguishing herself from the people around her. She is encouraged to avoid peer pressure and be an independent thinker. She will make her decisions regardless of what others think; she may defy her parents with her choice of a college major or career or spouse. The highest goal and virtue in this sort of culture is being true to oneself. The supreme value is the sovereignty of the individual.³⁷

Then they demonstrate why it was so radical to Jesus's original audience, and to Luke's:

Collectivist cultures are very different indeed. In a collectivist culture, the most important entity is the community—the family, the tribe or the country—and *not* the individual. Preserving the harmony of the community is everyone's primary goal, and is perceived as much more important than the self-expression or self-fulfillment of the individual. A person's identity comes not from distinguishing himself from the community, but in knowing and faithfully fulfilling his place. One's goal is not to get ahead or move beyond one's community; after all, "the tallest blade of grass is cut first." Rather, members of collectivist cultures make decisions based on the counsel of elders—parents, aunts or uncles. The highest goal and virtue in this sort of culture is supporting the community.³⁸

Jesus's claim was not quaint; it was radical. His mother was not the woman who gave birth to Him. His brothers were not those He grew up with. His family, His tribe, His community were the people who heard and obeyed the Word of God. Jesus's identity did not come from Mary (or Joseph), James, or Jude, but from the Word of God and the community the Word forms. The harmony of Jesus's community did not come from the expectations of His biological family, but from the Word of God. Jesus fulfilled His place in the community not by heeding the counsel of family, but by heeding the Word of God.

³⁷ E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 96.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 97.

In Luke 11:14–26, Luke records the accusation about Jesus casting out demons by the prince of the demons and His response. “As he said these things, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, ‘Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!’ But he said, ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!’” (Luke 11:27f). No doubt, being the biological mother of Jesus was a blessing (Luke 1:42). However, this anonymous woman can be just as blessed. How? By hearing and obeying the Word of God.

The Word of God is a seed in Luke’s gospel. However, it grows to maturity and bears fruit in Luke’s sequel, Acts. Trace the progress of the Word of God there. In Acts 4:31, Peter and John had been arrested for teaching in the name of Jesus. After their release, they prayed with the rest of the apostles and the saints, asking for boldness to preach the Word. When the prayer concluded, Luke records, “And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.” In Acts 6:2, the apostles maintain their commitment to proclaim the Word of God and because of that commitment, “the word of God continued to increase, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7). In Acts 8:14, Samaria received the Word of God. It does not stop there, not only Samaritans but Gentiles can receive the Word of God according to Acts 11:1. Herod might attack Christ’s kingdom, imprisoning and even killing apostles, but he is no match for the Word of God. He died, being eaten by worms, but the Word of God increased and multiplied (Acts 12:23f). In Acts 13:5, Paul and Barnabas proclaim the Word of God among the synagogues of the Jews. However, in Acts 13:46, the Jewish synagogues demonstrated themselves unworthy of eternal life (and the kingdom) by rejecting the Word of God. Therefore, Paul and Barnabas would turn to the Gentiles. Despite the fact that the Jews in Berea were noble-minded and searched the Scriptures to see what Paul taught was true, Jews from Thessalonica came and attacked the Word of God (Acts 17:13). In Acts 18:11, because

the Corinthian Jews in general had rejected Paul's preaching of the Word, he left the synagogue, but he was able to teach the Word of God in Corinth for 18 months.

Is Luke's ending to Acts merely a coincidence? Having come to Rome under arrest and awaiting trial, Paul meets with Roman Jews. Many of them reject the message of Jesus and Paul recites against them, of all passages, Isaiah 6:9f. The Jews are fulfilling the Sower parable and Jesus's entire reason for parables. Paul will go to the Gentiles. For two years, while under arrest, he was able to proclaim the kingdom of God and teach about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. Judgment was coming for the Jews. The destruction of Jerusalem would vindicate the kingdom of Christ. Only those who prepared by hearing and heeding the Word of God would be delivered.

You have a choice. The sower looked like a fool. He is a radical King of a radical kingdom, choosing from among the most shocking of candidates for entry into His kingdom. You can choose to leave behind your family, tribe, community, kingdom and enter His family, His tribe, His community, His kingdom, but only by the Word of God. When you do, you will also be thought a fool. However, "The choice is not whether we shall be viewed as a fool, but whose fool shall we be? Shall we be fools for Christ's sake, or fools in the sight of God?"³⁹

Let us prepare for the kingdom. Let us enter the kingdom. Let us spread the kingdom. Those who have ears to hear the Word of God, let us hear. Let us heed. Let us obey.

Conclusion

While we end this lesson where we began, we begin this series where we will end. The Sower is about hearing. The question is not will we know the parables, will we enjoy the parables, will we love the parables. The question is will we hear the parables.

It is time to give the parables themselves the respect and attention they deserve. They do not need to be treated as mirrors of Christian theology or human psychology, nor do they need to be rewritten,

³⁹James D. Bales, *The Sower Goes Forth* (Shreveport: Lambert Book House, 1973), 34.

curtailed, and controlled. They need to be heard, heard in context of Jesus as framed by the evangelists. Granted that respect, once again they will confront and inform as no other genre can, and will reveal that their author deserves not only to be heard, but also followed.⁴⁰

To that I say, "Amen." Those who have ears to hear, let us hear.

⁴⁰Snodgrass, "Modern Approaches to Parables," 190.

Was Lost and Has Been Found

The Parable of the Lost Sheep, Coin, and Son

Phillip Shumake

The famous Dutch artist Rembrandt was fascinated with the parable of the Prodigal Son. For decades, he poured over the story until he finally completed his masterpiece: *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Art historian Kenneth Clark described it as, “a picture which those who have seen the original in St. Petersburg may be forgiven for claiming as the greatest picture ever painted.”¹

Today, we share Rembrandt’s fascination with this parable. We return to Luke 15 again and again to read Jesus’ masterpiece. It is a powerful parable that Jesus uses to show us a Father full of love, a path full of hope, and a celebration not to be missed. These three lessons can be appreciated more fully if we begin our study by recognizing the unity of the parable as a whole. As Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep, lost coin, and lost sons, He repeats key details and phrases. Together these details and phrases elevate our admiration of our heavenly Father’s character and actions higher and higher as the story unfolds.

The Unity of the Parable

Luke introduces this parable as a response to the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes over Jesus receiving and eating with “sin-

¹John I. Durham, *The Biblical Rembrandt: Human Painter in a Landscape of Faith* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2004), 183.

ners.”² In v 3, Luke describes Jesus’ response as a single “parable.” This terminology invites us to consider the chapter not as three successive parables, but as a single unified parable told in three parts. Like a three-act play, this structure provides a perfect format for introducing and then amplifying characters and themes. The prominence of the final section is evident from its greater length and fuller details, but its richest lessons are made even more striking because of their connections to the previous sections. A quick read of the parable reveals that each part includes a consistent main character searching for a lost possession. However, there are five important, yet subtle, ideas which are carefully developed across all three parts that can only be appreciated when examining the parable in its entirety.

First, the setting increases in significance across all three parts of the parable. Jesus tells us of three lost items, but He begins in the field, then moves into the house, and finishes in the family. This progression in setting makes the parable grow increasingly more personal. Second, the value of the lost item increases in each part. The lost sheep is one out of a hundred, the coin is one out of ten, and the youngest son is one of only two. This narrowing focus directs our attention to the value of God’s children, whom He is passionately seeking. Third, the severity of the problem increases. In the first two parts, the lost item is out of sight and out of place, but in the final section the son’s condition is more than lost. In the eyes of the father, he was “dead and has come to life again” (v 24). The intensity of the tragedy and the remarkable transformation God accomplishes is on full display. Fourth, the level of detail regarding repentance increases. At the return of the lost sheep and lost coin, Jesus mentions “one sinner who repents,” but nothing in the story of the sheep or coin gives any description of what repentance actually involves. They only introduce the concept. These first two references alert His audience to the need for repentance, so that when it is described in detail at the turning point of the parable,

²Greek *diagonyzein*; NASB “grumble” occurs in Luke only here and in the Zacchaeus story (19:7), where it is used to the same effect in a similar context. James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 433.

this topic receives our full attention.

Finally, the realm of joy increases in each part of the parable. Like concentric circles approaching the center of a target, Jesus said there is joy in “heaven” over one who repents (v 7). Then, joy “in the presence of the angels of God,” and finally He describes the overwhelming joy of the father himself who runs to receive back his son who was lost and has been found (vv 10, 20). This progression indicates that God, the heavenly Father, is in fact rejoicing when the lost are found. Thus Jesus is sending a convicting message to the Pharisees and scribes who were grumbling over His behavior. Just as there is joy in each of these three realms, there should also be joy on earth. As the parable unfolds, it becomes unmistakable that Jesus is offering a rebuttal to the Pharisees’ critical attitudes and unloving treatment of their Jewish brethren.

Studying the chapter as one parable, with three distinct parts, sharpens our view of all five of these concepts. Jesus masterfully shows us both the incredible lengths God goes to, and the challenges God overcomes, in order to rescue His lost children. So let us turn our full attention to this loving father.

A Father Full of Love

The father is the central focus of Jesus’ masterpiece. He is mentioned directly and with pronouns twenty-six times in just twenty-two verses. It is his initiative and his grace that make the events of this parable possible.³ Jesus begins the parable emphasizing the passionate nature of the father’s search. He teaches us that God’s search is reasonable, sacrificial, and carried out with excellence.

To establish the reasonable nature of the father’s search, Jesus employs two rhetorical questions.⁴ He asks, “What man among you... Or what woman...” does not search carefully for their lost possessions. The circumstances Jesus describes make it clear that each object is highly valued by its owner. He establishes that a diligent search is the most reasonable action that can be taken when some-

³ *Ibid.*, 432.

⁴ Darrell Bock, *Luke, Volume 2: 9:51–24:53*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 1299.

thing we value is lost. There would be no grumbling or objection to such a reasonable pursuit. In fact, even the Old Testament contains stories of Saul seeking after valuable livestock (1 Sam 9:1–3) and Elisha assisting in the recovery of valuable property (2 Kng 6:1–6).

Jesus clearly establishes the search as reasonable, but He is not finished. In part three, He raises the stakes again. In 1 Samuel 9:5, Saul knew that his father, Kish, would soon worry far more about his son and servant, than his donkeys. Likewise, Jesus challenges us to consider the extreme sacrifices a parent will make when trying to save their child. True love compels us to go far beyond the expectations of others. When the life of someone we love hangs in the balance, the most unreasonable sacrifices are often made without hesitation. Only a father motivated by love can explain the outrageous choice found in v 12 to divide his living among his sons. Jesus wants us to see the true nature of the father's search. God values every single person, but His search is not based only on our value. He loves us, and He willingly makes sacrifices that appear unreasonable in order to bring us home.

These sacrifices are extreme, but they are not foolish. Because God values and loves us so much, He carries out His search with excellence. This excellence is evident in all three main characters. In the shepherd, we see the strength and compassion of God.⁵ He travels the great distance. He lifts the weak sheep. He carries the heavy burden. The power the sheep lacks, God readily supplies. This description of God corresponds perfectly with Ezekiel 34:11f, "For thus says the Lord God, "Behold, I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd cares for his herd in the day when he is among his scattered sheep, so I will care for My sheep and will deliver them from all the places to which they were scattered on a cloudy and gloomy day." Just one soul in need stirs the compassion of our awesome God so that He takes bold action on our behalf. Jesus makes it clear: man's salvation depends on the incredible power of God.

Additionally, the woman searching for her lost coin shows us

⁵See also Matthew 18:12–14.

God's diligence and confidence.⁶ This particular example is one that many people can relate to today. When husbands and children around the world cannot find something they have lost, the common cry to mom comes ringing out, "can you help me find it?" Families depend on and admire women who look more carefully, more methodically, and more diligently than the rest. This woman in Jesus' parable knows that her lost coin is nearby, and she will not rest "until" it is recovered. Neither the shepherd nor the woman have an arbitrary time limit on their search. Jesus says that both seek what has been lost "until" it is found (vv 4, 8). Such is the heart of our God. He brings His light, His cleansing, and His care to the search for our souls (v 8). May God help us to be more like this amazing woman, convinced that a lost soul nearby will be found if only we continue in the search.

In the father, we see the long-suffering of God. Jesus uses the Greek word *bios* to describe what the father gives for his children. His *bios*, his very life, is given.⁷ The King James Version captures this meaning with the translation, "he divided unto them his living," (v 12). After he pays this great cost, he waits. The father is almost uncomfortably absent from vv 13–16. The preceding examples of the shepherd and the woman prepare us to hear of a father who chases down his son at 2:00am and pleads with him to come home. Jesus has already thoroughly addressed those qualities in the first two parts. In this last part of the parable, we must see the long-suffering nature of God's search. He allows man's free will to be exercised while waiting patiently. This great endurance has puzzled the prophets and confused Christians, but it is part of His loving nature. Perhaps Peter gives the most satisfying summary of this quality in 2 Peter 3:9. "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance." God is the ultimate Father full of love. He searches diligently among the outcasts, the heartbroken, the weak, and the weary so that He can heal their wounds and carry them home.

⁶Bock, *Luke*, 1303.

⁷Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 439.

When time and sacrifice are required, He readily provides both. Because this is His true nature, there is hope for us all.

A Path Full of Hope

The younger and older sons may initially appear to be different, but Jesus reveals that both are in need of a new path. Each son demonstrates that he is self-centered and on a path of emptiness. They want only a part of the father's household. They want the money, but not the master. They want the goods, but not the one who is good. In *The Prodigal God*, Timothy Keller makes the excellent observation that the younger son is on a path of self-discovery and the older son a path of self-righteousness.⁸ Both sons are making self-centered decisions and are paying a high cost for their errors. In the parable, and among adults today, the path of self-discovery still leads to the most obvious external signs of emptiness. In v 16 we see the youngest son is broke, hungry, and barely surviving. To vividly demonstrate how far the younger son has fallen, Jesus tells us that this young man has resorted to feeding unclean pigs. Young adults must take note of this vital lesson: you are a child of God who is meant for far more than feeding pigs. You have been called to serve in the kingdom of Jesus Christ. As you complete your education and establish your family, do not fall into the trap of feeding pigs of materialism. Embrace contentment. Do not fall for feeding the pigs of worldly acceptance. You are not of this world. Do not waste your talents, energy, and inheritance feeding pigs of addiction and sin. You have been called to so much more. The path of self-discovery that this culture is captivated by is not the solution. Only when we discover our God-given abilities, our God-given place, and our God-given value can any of us lead a meaningful life here and enjoy eternal life to come. You are meant for fellowship with a holy God, not a life polluted by the unclean and worldly.

Jesus is also warning us that the self-righteous path of the older son is just as empty; an emptiness that is internal. Seeking to please

⁸ Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), 34.

his father purely through his labors has left him hypocritical, angry, discontent, and dishonoring. The older son transparently represents the Pharisees who make up Jesus' original audience. Like the Pharisees, he claims to fully obey the father, but openly refuses to imitate the father's grace. He is too fixated on what he believes is owed to him. In v 29, he over-estimates the value of his service and the extent of his obedience while under-estimating the value of his brother and the extent of his father's love. He cares more about receiving a goat and celebrating with his friends than he does about his brother's safety or well-being. His greatest desire is not to be in fellowship with his father or brother, but to receive the wealth of the father and surround himself with friends of his own choosing, just like his younger brother. He may have never geographically left his father, but his heart could not be further away. In this character, Jesus challenges every child of God to consider not just if their actions reflect the will of our heavenly Father, but if they have grown to imitate the Father's loving heart.

In the face of this great internal and external emptiness, Jesus provides the answer. He helps us realize that each of these sons acted on legitimate longings that had been twisted by Satan's deception. They need a new path full of hope. The desire to discover who we truly are, and what we can do is wonderful, but the answer does not come from self-discovery. It comes from the insights of our Creator. Likewise, the desire to become righteous and receive a reward is praiseworthy, but it is not attained by works alone. It is a gift of God's grace.

Jesus provides a path of hope to escape from this lost condition by beautifully describing the repentance of the younger son. The Lord moves the story out of the pig pen and into the mind of the younger son.⁹ From his inner most thoughts, we are shown the sincerity of his repentance. It includes five meaningful traits that each of us must reflect on: accountability, resolve, responsibility, action, and speech.

We see his accountability in the choice to avoid placing blame on his ungodly peers or difficult circumstances. We see his resolve

⁹Bock, *Luke*, 1312.

in the determination to make a righteous change in his life. We can admire that he refuses to stay in his lost condition, and refuses to make matters worse by ending his life, like Judas. Instead, he resolves to seek the father's mercy. His responsibility becomes evident in the decision to use whatever small amount of strength he possesses to begin moving towards the father with the heart of a humble servant. He is not plotting to manipulate his father to gain temporary relief on his own selfish terms. This is a changed man, with a fantastic new mindset. His repentance becomes clear when he puts these sincere plans into action. As Jesus describes the face to face reunion of father and son, the son's good intentions become meaningful actions followed by earnest words. We see that his speech is open and honest as he confesses, "Father, I have sinned." He acknowledges that his choices were more than matters of poor judgment. They were unrighteous transgressions against God and the family, and he is determined to leave that life behind. The path full of hope has been traveled. The parable presents sincere repentance as the path out of the emptiness of self and into the fullness of God's love.

At this point in the parable, we finally begin to gain a proper perspective of restoration. Jesus helps us see restoration from the top down and from the bottom up. In His description of the lost sheep and lost coin, restoration appears to be solely the result of God's activity. In the opening of the parable the lost are powerless. They are only found because of God's effort. Yet, in the final section, it appears to be solely the result of the younger son's repentance. Without the younger son's humility and return the restoration appears to have been impossible. Jesus is not giving contradictory descriptions, but is instead showing us the marvelous outcome when heaven's love and man's faith converge. Jesus gave His life to make the restoration depicted here possible, and His sacrifice was not in vain. He wants us to see that it leads to a celebration not to be missed.

A Celebration Not to Be Missed

In v 20, when the father sees his son approaching, he runs to him with zero hesitation. He accepts the son's repentance, but not

his estimation of his diminished value. The younger son declares that he is, “no longer worthy” (v 21). However, in the eyes of the father, he is worthy to be not only a son, but a celebrated member of the family. This father full of love restores his child and exalts him with a wardrobe of honor.¹⁰ He is given the best robe in the house, one of such great quality that it easily could have come from the father’s personal wardrobe.¹¹ All signs of separation and distress are removed by placing a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. Edwards notes, “Robe and ring signify enhanced status, but sandals signify new status, for going barefoot was a sign of humiliation and indignity (2 Sam 15:30), and especially slavery.”¹² The son is given more than he deserves in an incredible display of the father’s goodness. Then the father calls for a great celebration. “And bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate” (v 23). This statement obviously connects with Jesus’ previous descriptions of rejoicing over the lost sheep and lost coin in vv 6, 7, 9, and 10. A closer look in fact reveals that joy is a dominant theme in the parable and essential to the lesson Jesus is teaching the scribes and Pharisees.¹³

As Jesus constructed this parable phrase by phrase, He created a symphony of joy. Like a master conductor arranging the various sections of an orchestra, Jesus placed the term “celebrate” in vv 23, 24, 29, and 32. He placed the word “joy” in vv 7 and 10. He used the complementary terms “rejoice” and “rejoice together” in vv 5, 6, 9, and 32.¹⁴ He describes the gladness of the guests with the term “dancing” in v 25 and literally uses the Greek word for music, *symphonia*, in v 25 to help us hear the resounding sounds in this great symphony of joy coming from the father’s house over a lost soul who has been found. God’s love overflows with joy because the dead is now alive. The son no one ever expected to return, has repented and been restored.

¹⁰ See also Genesis 41:12; Esther 6:11.

¹¹ Keller, *The Prodigal God*, 26.

¹² Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 443.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 431.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

The occasion is so joyous that the father's desire to celebrate his restored son cannot be denied, but sadly it can be dishonored. Imagine attending a wedding where family from all over the world have gathered to celebrate, and then noticing one member of the family standing silently in the back, arms crossed, face turned away. When the photographer calls for the family to gather for a group photo, guests shuffle to the side to make a clear path to the front, but in clear view of all the guests, one angry and entitled son refuses to join the group photo. The disrespect of this son would be obvious to every guest at the wedding. This cold and insulting behavior is exactly what the older son is guilty of in Luke 15. Just as the younger son's rebellion would publicly dishonor his family, the older son's refusal to attend the celebration would be noticed by every servant and guest. His absence from the celebration communicates not only a refusal to participate, but a criticism of those who would dare to associate with the younger son, even a criticism of his father.

So just like the father went out to restore the younger son in v 20, now the father "came out and pleaded with" the older son in v 28. The father must explain to the self-righteous son, that this is a celebration not to be missed. The father patiently listens to the accusations of injustice and the assumptions of immorality before speaking with gentle, compelling clarity. "Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours" (v 31). At this moment of great distance and deep disrespect, the father is willing to be as extremely gracious to the older son as he has been to his youngest. The older son's efforts and obedience have not gone unnoticed, nor does the father intend for them to go unrewarded. The father's compelling statement continues, "we had to celebrate and rejoice." In no uncertain terms the father declares the truth about the celebration being held. It was right. He follows up with the two defining factors in this decision, "your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found" (v 32). We can and must rejoice because his condition is so radically changed. Like a lifeless stone block becoming a priceless sculpture or a loved one with a terminal illness making a full recovery the magnitude of the transformation calls for the greatest joy.

The truth of this transformation reaches deeply within our hearts. The father's words cannot be denied and they demand a response, but Jesus leaves the parable with a cliff-hanger ending.¹⁵ He never tells us what choice the older son makes, because He wants the response to come from the Pharisees and from everyone who would hear this parable in the future. His abrupt conclusion leaves us asking: will we join in the celebration? The full impact of the father's example is left to weigh on the Pharisees, the scribes, and on us. Luke records similar cliff-hangers in chapters seven, thirteen, and fourteen during other encounters with the Pharisees, but this one is the most famous.¹⁶ It leaves us asking: will we admit our own need for the heavenly Father's grace? Will we join Him in welcoming others, whose lives have been devastated by sin, into the family with joy?

Jesus invites us to join Him. To join in the family, even when we feel unforgiveable. To join in the search for every precious soul in need of hope. To join in the joyous celebration that overflows from God's love. Let us be a people who answer His invitation and who praise God, our loving Father, who rescues and restores His lost, prodigal children.

¹⁵ Bock, *Luke*, 1320.

¹⁶ Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 447. See also John 4:9–11.

Founded on the Rock

The Parable of the Wise Builder and the Fool

David Banning

Several years ago I was going through the process of purchasing a home. It was an older home built in 1965. Looking it over I noticed a few cracks in the mortar between the bricks. I was concerned. The foundation of the house had been repaired several years before, and the cracks made me wonder if it was still sound. As I talked it over with a structural engineer, he made this observation: “There are only two kinds of houses in southeast Texas; those with foundation problems and those that will have foundation problems.” I was not reassured.

Foundations are not the most beautiful part of a house. Chip and Joanna (hosts of HGTV’s *Fixer Upper*) rarely ask their clients to check out the amazing slab on their new home. Our eyes are far more likely to be drawn to granite countertops or wood floors. Who looks at the edges of that big hunk of concrete under the house? But foundations are vital, one of the most indispensable parts of a house. In fact, if an unstable foundation is left unaddressed, it will destroy all of the beautiful things in the home. This accounts for my conversation with the structural engineer.

As Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount, He is concerned with foundations. His concern is not with the slab on which our house rests, but with foundations on which lives are constructed. Having painted for us a vivid picture of kingdom citizenship, He closes with a powerfully simple parable designed to move us to act on what He said (Matt 7:24–27). Notice the pieces.

The Builders

The story begins with two men undertaking a task common to all men, in all cultures and at all times. They are building houses. We are supposed to find ourselves in these men. They represent all of us; we are all building. Every person is allotted a measure of time, opportunities and resources. We may not all receive the same amount or quality of materials, but we all get something with which to work.

But not everyone builds in the same way. Some are thoughtless and haphazard. They slide through life just trying to get through each day. They squander resources and miss valuable opportunities (and along the way exasperate their parents). Others are exactly the opposite. They are focused, intentional and goal-oriented. They are determined to take the hand they have been dealt and make the most of it. The rest of us find ourselves scattered between these two extremes. But we are all building.

The Lord weighs in on this project. He has something in mind for these materials that have been entrusted to us. It is what the sermon is all about. Jesus is describing the character of the kingdom dweller; what kind of life He has in mind for us. He is telling us how He wants us to build. This closing picture looks back on the entire sermon with one critical decision still left to be made.

The Foundations

Jesus' parable focuses our attention on one part of the construction, the foundation. This is where the two builders part company. They choose different foundations. The first constructs his house on the rock. In Luke's retelling he "dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock" (Luke 6:48). We are left with the impression that his choice came with a cost. Building on the rock required far more time and effort. In addition, this extra effort was being spent on a part of the house that was largely unseen. But the price paid was worth it. The rock provided a solid foundation that would secure the house.

His counterpart takes an easier, less time consuming path. He builds his house on the sand. At first glance it might appear that he

made the better choice. It took less time and effort and, in the end, his house appeared no different than the one constructed by his neighbor. But time would tell a different story.

Like the men in Jesus' parable, we too must choose a foundation on which we will build our lives. This is the point of the parable, to urge us to choose the right one. But what is the right foundation? In this parable, it is not Jesus, as the well-known children's song suggests. The Lord's focus here is more narrow: "... everyone who hears these words of mine and *acts on them*" or "... *does not act on them*" (Matt 7:24, 26). It is obedience to the words of Jesus which serves as the only solid foundation on which to build. The parable narrows life to a simple choice: either we build on rock or sand. Either we obey Jesus or we do not. These are the only options. All men choose one or the other. This is the critical decision to which Jesus calls His hearers at the end of the great sermon.

This is not a new idea. Jesus has been pressing this point throughout His conclusion. He began by offering men two paths through life (7:13f). There is a wide gate that leads to a broad path which many travel. The wide gate makes it easy to slide onto this road. Because the path is broad, Stott says "there is plenty of room on it for diversity of opinions and laxity of morals. It is the road of tolerance and permissiveness. It has no curbs, no boundaries of either thought or conduct."¹ Just as building on the sand initially requires less effort, so traveling this path appears easier. Since many choose to go this way, it adds to the sense that this is the right way.

The other path is different (7:14). The gate is small. It must be sought and chosen. Stott observes that, "...in order to enter it we must leave everything behind—sin, selfish ambition, covetousness, even if necessary family and friends. For no one can follow Christ who has not first denied himself."² From one perspective, it is a harder way to go. Travelers allow God to place boundaries and set limits. They must discipline themselves to honor these. This explains why few go this way. Most prefer a path with no limits

¹John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 194.

²*Ibid.*, 195.

leaving them free to live as they choose. However, this choice is shortsighted. The narrow path is ultimately easier because it avoids the pain and grief that result when God's boundaries are violated. It is why people who travel the narrow way are ultimately happier with their choice than those who select the other option. But it is not the more important reason.

Both paths are headed somewhere; they have a destination. The broad way leads to destruction, while the narrow way leads to life. Heaven or hell; these are the only possibilities. Our mixed-up world has found a way to embrace heaven while rejecting hell, but Jesus' teaching clearly makes this position unreasonable. There are not many paths to take through life that all end in the same place. There are only two ways to go and two very different destinations. Those who obey Jesus will go to heaven; those who do not will go to hell. To be sure people will be offended by this narrow view of life, but this does not make it any less true. For this reason, Jesus began this section with a passionate appeal, "Enter through the narrow gate" (Matt 7:13). Again, there is a choice to be made. Will we obey Jesus and travel the narrow path that leads to life; or will we follow the broad way to destruction? A choice must be made.

Efforts to walk the narrow path are complicated by false teachers (7:15–20). As we strive to find it, they muddy the waters. False teachers confuse us about how one enters the kingdom. They suggest that the narrow way is not as restrictive as it might appear. Some even claim that all paths ultimately lead to God, so it does not matter which road we travel. "The greatest threat to those who are earnestly seeking to enter the strait gate is that gaggle of deceivers who always seem to be hovering around where issues of life and death are being deliberated."³ Because of this threat, Jesus follows His teaching about the two paths with a somber warning, "Beware of false prophets" (Matt 7:15).

There are two important assumptions behind this warning. First, false teachers exist. There are men who speak truth and point people toward the narrow way; and there are deceivers who help

³Paul Earnhart, *Invitation to a Spiritual Revolution: Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Chillicothe, OH: DeWard Publishing, 2009), 141.

their hearers feel comfortable with the broad path. This has always been a danger for God's people. Jeremiah told the people of Judah, "... do not listen to your prophets ...for they prophesy a lie to you ..." (Jer 27:9f). Similarly Paul warned the Galatians that "...there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ..." (1:6–9). All religious teaching is not equally valid. It is our responsibility to distinguish between what is true and what is false. "The Son of God is telling us that the kingdom of heaven must be sought out in a world where lies and deceptions concerning it will abound."⁴ We will have to wade through a morass of confusing and conflicting claims to find the gate to the narrow way.

But we can find our way. The second assumption behind Jesus' warning assures us that we can know what is true. If we must distinguish between the true and the false, this necessarily implies that there is an objective standard by which to judge. Jesus provides this standard. He claimed to be the source of truth, the only way men can find the Father (John 8:31f, 14:6). Because His words are truth, they serve as the measure by which we evaluate all teaching. If a man's message agrees with Jesus, it is true. If it does not, he is a false teacher. This popular idea that truth is subjective ("What is true for you may not be true for me") is a lie designed to put men at ease with their choice to travel the broad way. There is an objective standard. We can know what is true.

We will need this objective standard because false teachers are deceptive (Matt 7:15). They do not always appear to be what they really are. They claim to be among the sheep, to speak the words of Jesus and to do great works in His name (Matt 7:21f), but in reality, they are vicious wolves disguised as sheep (Matt 7:15).

However, it is not possible for them to maintain their disguise indefinitely. Switching symbols in Matthew 7:16–20, Jesus says, "You will know them by their fruits." Just as a tree eventually bears fruit and makes clear what kind of tree it is, so also false teachers will bear fruit and expose who they really are. But what is this fruit? There is no reason to limit the meaning. Several things can reveal the truth about a teacher, from the impact of his message

⁴*Ibid.*, 140.

on his hearers, to the conduct of his life and what it reveals about his character. But perhaps most fundamental is his teaching. His message can be measured by the standard Jesus supplies. Does his teaching agree with Jesus? Does he direct his hearers toward the narrow way? Does it help men do the will of the Father (Matt 7:21)? Again, this objective standard provided by Jesus will either confirm that a teacher's message is true, or expose it as a lie. Either way, we can know.

And we must know. Jesus makes clear what is at stake. Destruction lies at the end of the broad way (Matt 7:13). Even the very religious who do not obey Jesus will be told to depart (Matt 7:23). Only those who do the will of the Father will enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 7:21). We need to know what is true.

As He concludes the sermon, Jesus calls us to the same decision in three different ways. Which road will we travel (Matt 7:13f)? Whose voice will we hear (Matt 7:15–23)? On which foundation will we build (Matt 7:24–27)? In each case the point is essentially the same. Will we obey Jesus? Obedience to Him is the only solid foundation on which a life can be constructed.

The Storms

Foundations are not the only problem for homeowners in Southeast Texas. During the late summer months, the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico periodically stir up a hurricane and send it our way. Depending on the size of the storm, winds can reach speeds of 175 miles per hour. Heavy rains fill the rivers and cause flood waters to rise. Homes are tested by storms like these. Before they strike, houses essentially look the same. It is difficult for an untrained eye to determine how well they are constructed. But a big storm will tell the story. It will expose a house for what it really is. I have seen the aftermath. Some houses hold together; others are literally blown to pieces. If a builder wants his house to withstand the storm, he cannot build for the moment. He must anticipate that day when the storm will come.

This is what the wise builder did in Jesus' parable (Matt 7:24f). He anticipated the storm. He took the time to dig deep and lay his

foundation on the rock. The fool was unwilling to go to all that trouble. He chose to build on the sand (Matt 7:26f). While both houses appeared to be the same when the skies were sunny, the storm proved otherwise. One house stood; the other fell.

As we set out to build and make decisions about our own foundation, we too must anticipate the storm. It is folly to do otherwise. Storms are certainly coming. As we make our way through life, we will face all kinds of adversity. Jobs will be lost. Spouses will be unfaithful. People will contract debilitating diseases. Children will lose their faith. Loved ones will die. Storms come for all of us.

But not all respond in the same way. Some are overwhelmed by their trials. They are swept away into despair and grief. Some even choose to walk away from Jesus. But not everyone responds to adversity in this way. There are others who persevere. They lean on Jesus more than ever. Through their ordeal, their faith actually grows stronger. How are we to account for these very different responses? The choice of foundation makes all the difference. It is the obedient man, who trusts completely in Jesus, who is able to stand firm when the storms come.

I was called to the hospital in June of 2018. My niece, Emily, had collapsed at home and was rushed to the emergency room. As I was making my way to the hospital, I received a second call. Emily had died. It was difficult to process those words. Emily was young, just 32 years-old. She left behind a husband and three little boys. She had just finished school and was in her first year of work as a family counselor. Her death was the worst storm our family had ever faced.

As we navigated the difficult days that followed, we were able to vividly see how Jesus sustains His people during their storms. Our spiritual family descended on the emergency room. There were dozens of fellow disciples lining the hallway weeping and praying with us (2 Cor 1:3f). In the days that followed, we were flooded with acts of kindness (prayers, calls, cards, food). Whatever we needed, it was supplied (Gal 6:2). But even more important, our family was able to grieve in hope (1 Thes 4:13–17). We knew that Emily was with the Lord. We knew that this was not the end; that

one day we would enjoy a grand reunion with her. It was these things, supplied by the Lord, that provided us with calm as we navigated this terrible storm.

Throughout our ordeal, I found myself wondering how people without this solid foundation are able to endure such terrible trials. The truth is many do not. Life's storms overwhelm them, even destroy them. Building on the sand may get you through the sunny days; but it will leave you completely unprepared for the storms ... and they are coming.

But it may be that Jesus has something else (or something more) in mind as He describes the storm in this parable. He has been pointing us to the end throughout His conclusion of the sermon: the destruction at the end of the broad way (7:13); the fire which consumes the bad tree (7:19); "that day" when the lawless are told to depart (7:22f). In this final parable Jesus describes a storm that exposes every man's life for what is really is. If at no other time, this will certainly happen in the end, when He comes in judgment. Pennington observes, "While one can rightly interpret the rain and floods and winds as the 'storms of life' that every human faces ... there is a further meaning evoked by these images, namely, that of the final judgment. These words in a Jewish and biblical context definitely conjure up the belief in the ultimate reckoning that all of humanity must face in the presence of their Creator."⁵

There is another storm coming, the judgment (Matt 25:31ff). The message of the parable is simple. It is the one who acts on the words of Jesus, the one who does what He says, who is able to stand on that day. Stott adds, "The question is not whether we *say* nice, polite, orthodox, enthusiastic things to or about Jesus; nor whether we *hear* his words, listening, studying, pondering and memorizing until our minds are stuffed with his teaching; but whether we *do* what we say and *do* what we know, in other words whether the lordship of Jesus which we profess is one of our life's major realities."⁶

⁵Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 282.

⁶Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture*, 209.

The Teacher

Stott's words carry us beyond the parable to the closing verses of the chapter: "When Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (Matt 7:28f). Matthew points us to what is truly important about this great sermon. What matters most is not what was said, but who said it. Earnhart put it this way: "At last we are not so much confronted with the compelling and challenging message of this great sermon as we are with the person of the Preacher Himself."⁷

The crowd sensed that there was something special about Jesus. He was not like other teachers. They also seem to know what made Him different, "... He was teaching them as one having authority." The question is, do we see it?

We rightly resist any attempt to make Jesus merely a man. Even if He is judged to be a great man or great moral teacher, we protest that this is not enough. He is much more. But is He? Is He much more to us? In Luke's account of the parable, Jesus begins with a question: "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46). Sometimes our resistance to what the Teacher said raises questions about our estimation of Him. If He is truly Lord, how can we quibble over His instructions or twist His words to fit what we are already determined to do? If we truly believe He is Lord, then humble obedience should naturally follow.

Stott says, "The ultimate issue posed by the whole Sermon concerns the authority of the preacher. It is not enough to call him 'Lord' or to listen to his teaching. The question is whether we mean what we say and do what we hear. On this commitment hangs our eternal destiny."⁸ This brings us back to the point being made in His final parable. It is the man who acts on the words of Jesus who is truly wise and ready for that last great storm. Let us be wise and build our lives on this rock-solid foundation.

⁷Earnhart, *Invitation to a Spiritual Revolution*, 171.

⁸Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture*, 26.

Part Two

The Day Lectures

New Wine in Old Wineskins: The Radical Truth of the Kingdom

The Parables of New Cloth and New Wine

Matthew W. Bassford

There are many ways in which our society does not see eye-to-eye with Jesus. One of the least obvious of these is the way in which our view of learning and education differs from His. Today, we assume that the role of the teacher is to make learning as effortless as possible for the student, and that as many should be taught as possible.

Jesus' perspective was markedly different. He was famous for teaching in parables,¹ and He used them as much to conceal as to reveal. Matthew 13:10–17 reveals His intent to enlighten only those who cared enough to ask, while leaving the apathetic multitudes in the dark. When Jesus' explanations for parables are recorded, as with the parable of the sower, we have little trouble understanding, but when they are not (or were not given in the first place), we must confront the same perplexities that confounded Jesus' original hearers.

So it is with the parable of the wineskins, as recorded in Matthew 9:16f, Mark 2:21f, and Luke 5:36–39. The events He describes would have been familiar to his listeners. However, His meaning is not so plain, neither to his immediate audience nor to legions of later interpreters.

We cannot expect to be told. We must ask. If we do, though, we will discover a truth as relevant to us as to first-century Jews. If we

¹Matthew 13:34.

wish to know the blessing of Christ, we must have hearts that are ready to receive Him.

Parable and Context

The setting for this parable is relatively simple. It begins, as many of the stories of the gospel do, with a confrontation between Jesus and a group of people.² They want to know why His disciples do not fast, even though the Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist do. Jesus' reply has three prongs. First, He observes the incongruity of wedding guests fasting when the bridegroom is present. Second, He notes that it is inappropriate to attach a patch of new cloth to an old garment. When washed, the new patch will shrink and make a worse tear. Third, He points out that no one puts new wine in an old wineskin. As the new wine ferments, it will produce carbon dioxide, which will cause the stretched-out old skin to burst and the wine to be lost. Instead, it is better to put new wine in new skins that still have "give" to them.

Flawed Readings

When the meaning of the text is so veiled, it is hardly surprising when many common interpretations of it miss the mark. The first of these flawed interpretations is that the parable is about attempting to attach the teaching of Christ to the teaching of the Pharisees. For example, Garland writes, "The parable makes the case 'that it is impossible and destructive to mix new ways of thinking and living with old ways of thinking and living.'"³ The Pharisees need to "accommodate Jesus' offer of forgiveness to sinners and the reinstatement of the outcasts in God's covenant people."⁴

Though facially plausible, this interpretation does not fit the context or the elements of the parable. If the patch/new wine is the doctrine of Christ and the old garment/old wineskin is the doc-

²They are described as the disciples of John in Matthew 9:14, as "people" in Mark 2:18, and as "they" in Luke 5:33, which has as its antecedent "the Pharisees and their scribes" in Luke 5:30. Though the questioners were doubtless heterogeneous, I will refer to them for the sake of convenience as "the Pharisees."

³David E. Garland, *Luke*, ZECNT 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 254.

⁴*Ibid.*

trine of the Pharisees, what happened to the bridegroom so prominent in the first part of Jesus' three-part answer?⁵ Similarly, the last part of the parable tells us that the new wine can be stored in new wineskins.⁶ Is there some other doctrine to which we are supposed to attach the doctrine of Christ that would suit it better than the doctrine of the Pharisees? Ultimately, this perspective on the text does not explain nearly enough.

Equally problematic is the idea that the parable is about the need to adapt the Lord's church to changing cultural circumstances. This is the view espoused in the seminal issue of the journal *Wineskins*, which obviously takes its name from the parable. There, the editors write, "In [Jesus'] metaphor, the skins are the culturally-conditioned and time-bound experiences of the people who form the covenant community of God. When those receptacle-carriers of the heavenly message become fixed and inflexible, they no longer serve God's purpose effectively."⁷ They go on to observe that the church is a communications vehicle and must respond to its environment.

In this reading, the culture is the patch/new wine, and the church is the garment/wineskin that must adapt or perish. However, this is contextually suspect, both in the immediate passage and in the wider context of Jesus' ministry. Once again, this interpretation does not make room for the bridegroom and so disrupts the parallelism of Jesus' response.

Additionally, it would be wondrously strange, to say the least, for Jesus to argue that His church needs to conform to the spirit of the times. His attitude toward the spirit of His own time was uniformly hostile. Indeed, He described His contemporaries as a "faithless and twisted generation."⁸ He warned that the sins of preceding generations were going to be charged against it.⁹ He did such a terrible job of adapting to His own society that its leaders

⁵ E.g., Matthew 9:15.

⁶ Matthew 9:17.

⁷ The Editors, "Wineskins: A Purpose Statement," *Wineskins* 1 (1992).

⁸ Luke 9:41.

⁹ Matthew 23:36.

betrayed and murdered Him. Surely, then, any attempt on our part to make peace with a generation as faithless and twisted as His would be a betrayal of His spirit.

A Better Reading

Rather than imposing our own agenda on the text, we are much better served to let it speak for itself. The key to understanding it is to recognize the three parts of Jesus' answer as parallel and to read them in parallel. The message of the bridegroom illustration is no different than the message of the new-patch illustration or the new-wine illustration.

The first of this trio, though, is the easiest to understand because one of its elements is still literal. Jesus still is talking about fasting, the activity under discussion. He observes, though, that the presence of a particular person can make this traditional practice inappropriate. Religiously observant Jews fasted regularly, but no wedding guest fasted in the presence of the bridegroom. In the same way, Jesus argues, it is inappropriate for His disciples to fast in His presence.

This principle, that the introduction of Jesus can invalidate tradition, gives us the key to understanding everything else in this context. The new patch and the new wine are not the teaching of Jesus. They are Jesus Himself, and it is He who creates conflict with the old garment/old wineskin of custom. There is no room in the traditions of the Pharisees for somebody like Jesus. He cannot operate within that framework without doing violence to it. If He tries, He will simultaneously destroy the tradition and render Himself ineffective.

The problem here, of course, is not tradition *per se*. Instead, it is the inflexibility of those who choose to cling to tradition rather than accepting Jesus for what He is. This is the mindset of the synagogue ruler in Luke 13:10–17 who sees Jesus heal a woman who has been disabled for 18 years and can only object because the healing took place on the Sabbath. He rejected the Messiah because Jesus was not the Messiah his heart was prepared to accept.

Such inflexibility can be traced to the Pharisees' assumptions about the Messiah and His work. Paul identifies their problem in

Romans 10:3. They failed because they were ignorant of God's purposes and believed that they could justify themselves.

Their desire to establish their own righteousness (and conviction that they could) was driven by their misunderstanding of the kingdom of God. They looked for an external assertion of God's dominion.¹⁰ They thought that if they were sufficiently godly, He would again intervene in history and send the Messiah to drive out the hated Romans.¹¹ Their framework of traditions—the old garment, the old skin—was designed to ensure that the necessary level of godliness was attained.

These expectations for the Messiah left no room for Jesus. He came so that the kingdom could come within them rather than outside of them, leading to control in the heart, not lines on a map.¹² The enemy He aimed to defeat was the devil, not the Romans.¹³ Regardless of what the Pharisees believed about their own righteousness, Jesus knew that their hearts lay under the dominion of the evil one, and they needed to repent.

As a result, Jesus and His teachings posed a fundamental threat to the Pharisees' beliefs about God and themselves. Rather than being the vehicle by which God's kingdom could come externally, their traditions were the biggest obstacle to the kingdom coming internally—the problem, not the solution. They could not simultaneously cling to those traditions and accept the Messiah. Sadly, given the choice between the new wine and the old wineskin, they chose the wineskin.

Today, we must take warning from their example. Jesus is not the Christ of our preconceptions. He has not come to straighten everybody else out and give us a pat on the head. He has come to straighten us out. In consequence, He can only be received by the heart that is willing to stretch to accommodate Him. Rather

¹⁰ Hence Jesus' comment in Matthew 11:12 about those who sought to take the kingdom of heaven by force.

¹¹ It is worth noting that the false Messiahs of Scripture (Theudas and Judas of Galilee in Acts 5:35–37 and the Egyptian in Acts 21:38) were all concerned with some type of this-world revolt. They sprang naturally from their society.

¹² Luke 17:20f.

¹³ John 3:8.

than demanding that He conform Himself to us, we must conform ourselves to Him.

The New Wine of Jesus

The applications that we could make of this principle are nearly infinite. However, we especially ought to consider the applications that the text makes for us. In the immediate context of this story, Jesus is described in three main ways: as physician, bridegroom, and Lord in Mark and Luke¹⁴, and as physician, bridegroom, and Son of David/Lord in Matthew.¹⁵

This is hardly an accident. John 21:25 points out that the gospel writers had an inexhaustible supply of the wise sayings and wondrous deeds of Jesus. They selected the material they did not because they were groping for anecdotes to fill a page, but because certain stories arranged in a certain way would reveal the truths about Jesus that they wanted to reveal. As we read the gospels, then, we must continually ask, “Why is this revealed here, in this order, in this context?” The answer to the question is usually rewarding.

Indeed, this is the case with the parable of the wineskins. It does not appear next to the feast at Levi’s house and the confrontation over picking grain on the Sabbath out of happenstance. Instead, those accounts also reveal the Pharisees’ inability to stretch themselves to contain the new wine of Jesus. They highlight what about Him most troubled them.

Nor should we expect this struggle to be confined to the Pharisees. Christ is eternally new, eternally relevant, eternally demanding. If we think that we can accommodate Him in our lives without having to stretch, we are engaging not with Jesus but with an idol of our own creation. If the same attributes that challenged the Pharisees do not challenge us, it is because we have failed to reckon with them altogether.

¹⁴Mark 2:13–28; Luke 5:27–6:5.

¹⁵Matthew 9:9–17, 27–31. In the case of Matthew, “Son of David” and “Lord” are from the story of the healing of the two blind men, rather than from the story of harvesting grain on the Sabbath, but the effect of this different account is still to focus attention on Jesus’ Sonship and Lordship.

Jesus as Lord

Let us begin by considering the last of these challenging attributes, Jesus' Lordship. It is featured in the narrative of Luke 6:1–5. The Pharisees object to Jesus' disciples plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath. In response, Jesus points out that when he was hungry, David took and ate the bread of the Presence in the tabernacle, which by law only the priests could eat. He concludes by observing, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

Much discussion of this text has to do with whether it sets out a doctrine of necessity. Was David justified in unlawfully eating the bread because of his need? Or, on the other hand, does Jesus bring up the story only to expose the Pharisees' inconsistency in exalting David and condemning Him?

This discussion, interesting though it may be, misses the point. Jesus' rebuttal is not founded on what David did or did not do. It is founded on His claim to be Lord of the Sabbath. Because He is Lord, whatever He says is right, is right. End of discussion.

We too must learn to bow before the Lordship of Jesus, and none of us, either in our personal lives or in our churches, are submitting as completely as we should. In many ways, the editors of *Wineskins* are correct in asserting that the Restoration is incomplete, a work in progress. However, the aim of our progress must not be cultural relevance. It must be to grow up in all things into Christ our head.

This is true even in areas where we think we have submitted ourselves. If we do not use instrumental music in our assemblies, we do well. However, we must recognize that the command of Colossians 3:16 is not to shun the instrument. It is to let the word of Christ dwell richly within us. Everything else in the verse—teaching and admonishing one another, singing with thankfulness in our hearts to God—is to be an expression of that rich indwelling.

Certainly, the use of the instrument should trouble us because the text says nothing concerning instrumental music. However, it also should trouble us because our hearts are filled with the gospel, and nobody ever learned the gospel from an instrument. The form of our worship must be the New-Testament pattern, but the

substance must be Christ. If we have lost touch with the substance, we should not be surprised when we struggle to maintain the form.

Jesus as Physician

Another of Jesus' guises in the context appears in Mark 2:14–19. Here, He reports to the Pharisees that He associates with sinners and tax collectors because He is a physician and they need healing. It is worth noting, though, that this is a story about spiritual rather than physical healing. Despite all the miracles of healing that He worked, Jesus' primary concern was with the soul, not the body, with welfare in the life to come rather than welfare in this life.

During His ministry, many who came to Jesus missed the point and focused on the physical rather than the spiritual. Among these, perhaps the most notable is the leper of Mark 1:40–45. Jesus cures him of his leprosy, but His gracious act does nothing for the leper's rebellious heart. When we first meet him, we find him in the middle of a city, exactly where the Law forbade him to be.¹⁶ Our last sight of him is as he is telling everyone what Jesus has done for him, even though Jesus expressly told him not to do so. His encounter with Jesus left him outwardly transformed but inwardly unchanged.

We too must beware of seeking the wrong kind of healing from Jesus. It is easy for us to look to Him primarily as fairy godmother rather than Savior. We seek Jesus because He comforts us when we are depressed, because He answers our prayers when we need help, and because He gets us through hard times.

Jesus, of course, does all of those things for His people, just as He healed the sicknesses of the multitude. However, healing the multitude was not the purpose of His ministry, and helping us through our earthly struggles is not the purpose of His relationship with us either. The true gift that He gives is eternal life rather than the alleviation of misery in this life. If, like the leper, we focus on His healing our bodies, we may neglect the healing that He offers to our souls.

¹⁶Leviticus 13:45f; Luke 5:12.

Jesus as Bridegroom

Finally, the text calls us to contemplate Jesus as the bridegroom in whose presence we are to feast.¹⁷ We have already seen how important this self-description is to understanding the parable of the wineskins, but we must also allow it to shape our understanding of how Jesus is to change us. Indeed, this is one of the most common ways for Jesus to refer to Himself. The gospels are replete with bridegrooms and wedding feasts, a fascinating preoccupation for a man who was destined to remain single for His entire life.

It has been suggested that many contemporary praise songs appear to treat Jesus as our boyfriend, but Jesus as bridegroom is a different matter. Bridegrooms are about expectation, not infatuation. Indeed, Jesus as bridegroom is frequently an absent one. In Mark 2:20, He is about to be taken away. In Matthew 25:5, He is delayed and will not arrive until long after the hour in which He was expected.

Here, we encounter one of the great paradoxes of Christianity. Jesus is always with us, but we are not with Him. Nonetheless, this absent bridegroom—present for a brief time, taken away, long delayed, yet promised to return permanently—is to be the focus of our expectation and our joy.

We must stretch to accommodate Jesus as Lord and physician, but accepting Him as bridegroom is perhaps the most challenging task of the three. As the foolish virgins of Matthew 25 discovered, waiting for the bridegroom is no easy task. Carrying a torch for Jesus is nothing next to keeping our lamps filled for Him. There are many earthly joys that seek to intrude, and some of them are more obvious than others. All of us recognize the conflict between sin and Jesus. We are less quick to see the conflict between children and Jesus, or popularity and Jesus, or any of the other cherished idols of our society and Jesus. We want to have our wedding cake and eat it too.

Ultimately, though, we cannot make our lives about waiting for the bridegroom if we allow them to become about anything else. Perhaps the key lies in living with a continual awareness of His

¹⁷Mark 2:18–20.

imminence. This concept is beautifully captured in the hymn, “Rejoice, Rejoice, Believers,” particularly its second verse:

The watchers on the mountain
Proclaim the Bridegroom near;
Go meet Him as He cometh
With hallelujahs clear.
The marriage-feast is waiting,
The gates wide open stand;
Up, up, ye heirs of glory;
The Bridegroom is at hand!¹⁸

Jesus truly is at hand, unimaginably distant from us, but far closer in many senses than we think. Everything between Him and us is a distraction, soon to be abolished. In the times when we feel closest to Him, we nearly can see the open gates, with the table set and waiting beyond them. When we keep our minds on Him, this is the vision upon which we fix them.

Eventually earthly bridegrooms become husbands, mundane creatures with an annoying variety of uncivilized habits. The delight of Jesus as bridegroom, though, cannot fade but only deepen. May each of us determine to seek Him, find Him, and receive Him, that we may pass into His wedding feast and remain there in the joy of His presence for eternity.

¹⁸L. Laurenti, “Rejoice, Rejoice, Believers,” trans. S. Findlater, *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), #72.

The Last Shall Be First: The Radical Reordering of the Kingdom

The Parables of the Day Laborers and the Unprofitable Servants

Jonathan Caldwell

It is easy to think highly of ourselves. It is easy to come to a high level of self-worth and self-satisfaction. It is easy for us to think that our cares and concerns are most important, that our ideas are most beneficial, that our needs are most pressing, and that our work is most significant. How could this place carry on without us? Who could possibly do what we do? We crave recognition and we often desire it uncoupled with the praise of others. When we do not get our pat on the back we step forward and ask, “What about me?” To this attitude, Jesus responds with the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard.

A landowner needed workers. At daybreak he went to the marketplace where the day laborers gathered. The landowner found some men and agreed to pay them a denarius for their time. At the third hour, the landowner returned to the marketplace for more workers. He found others standing around and told them to go work in the vineyard promising to compensate them appropriately. This happened again at the sixth and ninth hours. At the eleventh hour (only an hour before quitting time) the owner made one more trip to the marketplace. Upon finding more men standing around,

he asked, “Why do you stand here idle all day?”¹ The workers provided a simple answer, “No one hired us.” So the landowner did and sent them into the vineyard.

Only an hour later, the landowner instructed his foreman to assemble the workers and pay them beginning with the last ones hired. When the foreman paid the one-hour workers a full denarius, those who worked all day assumed they would receive more. Therefore, when they received a denarius they complained about their compensation. They argued that the men who worked but one hour were made equal to those who had worked all day in the heat.² The master simply reminded the twelve-hour workers of their original agreement and his right to be generous to those who had not worked all day. Then he challenged their hearts by asking why they were envious of his generosity. Jesus concluded the parable with the proverb, “So the last will be first, and the first last.”

Problematic Past Readings

One of the major debates in early centuries revolved around the best way to read parables. Were they stories that taught a lesson or were they allegories which contained symbolism and hidden meanings? This issue can best be seen in Origen’s reading of the Good Samaritan: the injured man represents Adam, Jerusalem is heaven, Jericho is the world, the robbers are the devil and his minions, the Samaritan is Christ, the donkey is the body of Christ, the inn is the church, the two denarii are Peter and Paul, and the promise to return stands for the final judgment. This sounds wonderful but it turns the parable into the story of salvation while ignoring

¹The word translated “idle” means to be unemployed and may carry the idea of laziness or worthlessness. William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 128. Contra Jeremias, I do not believe we should see these men as lazy. First, they receive no rebuke. Second, if they were lazy, why bother coming to the place where one looks for work?

²The term translated “scorching heat” simply means “heat” but (based on its usage in the LXX) could be a reference to the scorching east wind. Either way, the point is the same: they worked through the hottest part of the day. *BDAG*, 536.

the reason Jesus told the parable.³ Sadly, the same thing has been done with our parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard.

In many readings of this parable, the focus has been on the master's trips back to the market for more workers. The master goes to the marketplace five times (the beginning of the day, the third, sixth, ninth, and eleventh hours). Many interpreters have seen various meanings in this. Some have argued that the five trips represent the five senses.⁴ Many (including Origen) have suggested that each trip represents a different period of Biblical history beginning with Adam, then Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Christians.⁵ The explanation is that those under the old covenant had less knowledge and, thus, harder toil.⁶ With how the parable is often used, we are not surprised that some have seen in it the various stages of life: youth, adolescence, adulthood, maturity, and old age.⁷ All three of these readings miss the point of the parable by focusing on incidental details.⁸

This is an issue that makes reading parables difficult. Which details matter and which are provided to move the story along? Klyne Snodgrass explains the issue:

Is the parable “allegorical” with some or all of the elements in the story corresponding to theological realities? This is an unavoidable question. Parables are analogies, and analogies have correspondenc-

³I do not want to tread further on plowed ground. For a discussion on the purpose of this parable, see *The Parable of the Good Samaritan: The Attribute of Selfless Service* in this book.

⁴J. M. Tevel, “The Labourers in the Vineyard: The Exegesis of Matthew 20, 1–7 in the Early Church,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 46 (1992): 358.

⁵*Ibid.*, 362–3. I have provided a standard example. Part of the problem with this is that few can agree on which Old Testament characters should stand as representative of each hour.

⁶Richard Chenevix Trench, *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord* (Pantianos Classics, 1902), 79.

⁷Tevel, “Laborers in the Vineyard,” 359–60.

⁸Jeannie K. Brown, *Matthew*. Teach the Text Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2015), 228, says, “These workers fill in color for the story but are not the focus of the parable when it comes time for distribution of payment.” Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 224 says “the various hours at which the different men began to work merely illustrate the diverse nature of the citizens of the kingdom.” Either way, it should be clear that the middle three groups are not the key to interpreting the parable.

es or they cannot work. The symbolic world of the parable points to God and those seeking to serve him, as already indicated. However, correspondences that make analogies work are a far cry from turning a story that was not allegory into allegory, which both the church and biblical scholars have often done.⁹

This question is made more difficult when we ignore the context of the parable. Is Jesus talking about the various stages of salvation history? Or is Jesus presenting a truth about status, rank, and order in the kingdom of heaven?

Other Problematic Readings

Before addressing this parable in its context, something must be said about two popular ways of understanding this parable. It is argued that this parable teaches the need for employers to pay a “living wage” and to be generous like the landowner. Doug Newton says the parable teaches that “The kingdom of heaven is not about getting someone’s sweat but about giving someone bread.”¹⁰

Amy Jill Levine presses for this reading. “The owner is the role model for the rich; they should continue to call others to the field and righteously fulfill a contract whose conditions from the beginning are to pay ‘what is right’—and what is right is a living wage.”¹¹ To fully emphasize the generosity of the landowner, Levine argues that the late comers were too weak to work the full day.¹² Not only has this reading been removed from the context, it has now been removed from the text. Is this the best interpretation of the parable within its context? Levine makes the parable about generosity and economics. No doubt Jesus spoke of such issues in the parable of The Rich Man and Lazarus and The Rich Fool. Such is not the purpose of this parable. Snodgrass argues that the details of the story simply do not fit a lesson on generosity—one denarius is barely

⁹Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 373.

¹⁰Doug Newton, *Fresh Eyes on Jesus’ Parables: Discovering New Insights in Familiar Passages* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2018), 53.

¹¹Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 235.

¹²*Ibid.*

a subsistence wage. If the amounts were like that in the parable of The Unforgiving Servant or The Two Debtors—an exaggerated amount—then the point might be different.¹³

Pablo Jimenez reads the parable through the eyes of those who have had various struggles in his Hispanic congregation (some due to immigration issues, others to financial problems).¹⁴ He argues that the main point of a sermon on the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard—or the Parable of the Affirmative Action Employer as he calls it—would be “God’s love for the poor.”¹⁵ There is no doubt that God loves the poor. This, however, is not the message of this parable. This is a good example of eisegesis as opposed to exegesis.

Karen Lebacqz also pushes this interpretation as she discusses the shame of the day laborers who return home without having labored. She reads the concept of the year of Jubilee into this parable and argues that the landowner is striving to reestablish the “equilibrium” accomplished in the Jubilee. She says that the equal payment of the workers restores “each to a place of standing within the community.”¹⁶ This completely ignores the fact that Jesus is speaking of the Kingdom of Heaven, not first-century Palestine. This kind of interpretation is due to an anachronistic reading of our culture’s concerns into the first-century text. This reading suffers from the same flaws as earlier interpretations—they ignore the context in which Jesus spoke the parable.

A second popular view of this parable is that Jesus is rebuking the concept of work for reward.¹⁷ This reading claims to keep the

¹³ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 375–6.

¹⁴ Pablo A. Jimenez, “The Laborers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16): A Hispanic Homiletic Reading,” *Journal for Preachers* 21 (1997): 39.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Karen Lebacqz, “Justice, Economics, and the Uncomfortable Kingdom: Reflections on Matthew 20:1–16,” *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1983): 41.

¹⁷ Trench, *Notes on the Parables*, 81; Paul Earnhart, *Glimpses of Eternity: Studies in the Parables of Jesus* (Chillicothe: DeWard Publishing, 2012), 159; Frederick C. Spurr, “The Laborers in the Vineyard: An Interpretation,” *The Review and Expositor* 17 (1920): 3–10 reads the parable as a test of the workers. He argues that the first workers are only in it for the money and will quit at the least provocation. The last workers, however, are humble and trusting. It appears that Spurr takes over Jesus’ parable and recrafts his own.

parable in its context but then ignores what Jesus says here and elsewhere about reward. A. B. Bruce says that the parable “teaches in effect that a small quantity of work done in a right spirit is of greater value than a great quantity done in a wrong spirit.”¹⁸ The argument is that the first workers were focused on the payment while subsequent workers trust in the landowner to do what is right. Hendriksen says that the first ones hired had a “mercantile spirit that had marked them from the very beginning.”¹⁹ Wilkins further argues that “those who serve in order to receive a reward will be last, and those who serve only in order to respond in obedience to Jesus’ summons will be first.”²⁰ This is hardly a necessary inference. We must remember that the landowner promised to pay the later workers. Though he does not specify how much, we can assume each worker calculated the percent of a denarius they would receive for working only $\frac{3}{4}$ of the day, $\frac{1}{2}$ of the day, $\frac{1}{4}$ of the day, and $\frac{1}{12}$ of the day. Davies and Allison say “nothing is to be made of the circumstances that no agreement on wages is mentioned: this is not proof of a special trust the workers had. Rather, mention of their recompense at this juncture would extend the narrative unnecessarily and diminish the dramatic tension.”²¹

In the previous section (Matt 19), Peter claimed to have forsaken everything (unlike the rich man) and asked Jesus, “What will we have?” If Jesus proceeded into the parable from that question, then we might be inclined to believe that Jesus is rebuking such a “hireling” attitude. But Jesus answers Peter’s question with an explanation of what Peter and others could expect. We can add to this the plethora of statements Jesus makes about the reward awaiting His disciples: Matthew 5:11f; 6:3f 6, 17f, 33; 7:7; 10:41f; 16:27; 25:21; Luke 6:35, 38; 14:12–14. This seems incompatible with a reading of

¹⁸Alexander Balmain Bruce, *The Parabolic Teaching of Christ* (Armstrongs 1894), Kindle location 3581–3584.

¹⁹William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, BNTC 9 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1973), 739. But notice the parable does not emphasize this aspect of the story. Maybe the landowner is the one who initiated the discussion of compensation.

²⁰Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 664.

²¹W. D. Davies and D. Allison, *Matthew Vol. 3*, ICC (Edinburg: T & T Clark, 2004), 73.

our parable that sees it as a rebuke of Peter, a “hireling” attitude, or a focus on rewards.²² Certainly, we do not serve God only because He promises a reward.²³ Yet, if it were improper to be motivated by a reward, we might expect Jesus to say less about it.

Misplaced Truths

It is possible to teach the right doctrine from the wrong passage. For example, some have used Amos 5:23 to teach against instrumental music. “Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen.” Removed from its context, the passage certainly seems to say that instrumental music is not acceptable. But is this what God, through Amos, is talking about? We understand that instruments were prescribed in Old Testament worship and it is that worship which Amos is referencing. His rebuke of the people is that they mistreat the poor, widows, and orphans but still go to the temple and worship. Of course, the New Testament teaches that our heart is the proper instrument of worship and that we are to sing. Here we have a case of the right doctrine, but the wrong passage.

It is possible to see in this parable the extreme, overflowing love, mercy, and grace of God. Here is a landowner who hires people who provide little value. They work but one hour and he pays them for the full day. What generosity! Any worker hired after the first group is unable to earn the wage they receive. The connection with our God is clear. The love and grace He pours out is such that we can never earn it. We only picked a few grapes and some of us barely made it to the vineyard before He poured out the heavenly blessings.

Leon Morris says, “That he had paid the full day’s wage probably indicates a genuine concern for the needs of others.”²⁴ The Bi-

²² “That Jesus does not rebuke Peter may surprise those who think that the prospect of reward is not a proper motive for serving God.” David L. Turner, *Matthew*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 475.

²³ In the context of this parable, Nathan Eubank calls our reward a “gift-wage, a wage for work done that goes beyond what the worker has earned.” Nathan Eubank, “What Does Matthew Say about Divine Recompense? On the Misuse of the Workers in the Vineyard (20.1–16),” *JSNT* 23 (2013): 258.

²⁴ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,

ble is full of the idea that God loves us and gives not according to merit but need. Nolland says the parable emphasizes the needs of the workers over that of the landowner. Concerning the workers, he says that the landowner “can use them; not, he needs them.”²⁵ Keener says, “The image in Jesus’ parable is one of unmerited grace; the owner realizes that an hour’s fraction of a day’s wage would not sustain a family.”²⁶ This is true and wonderful. We celebrate with R. T. France who says, “The God who lavishly clothes the flowers and feeds the birds delights to give his servants far more than they could ever deserve from him.”²⁷

Jeremias envisions a scene of lazy workers who gossip away the day. However, the landowner knows they have nothing to take home and has compassion on them. He says this is how God is with man, even tax collectors and sinners.²⁸ How does this parable explain the kingdom of God? This parable shows the “difference between two worlds: the world of merit, and the world of grace; the law contrasted with the gospel.”²⁹ There is no way for us to calculate how we might work long enough to earn our salvation. This is the grace of God. This is what Philip Yancey calls the “scandalous mathematics of grace.”³⁰

We dare not downplay the importance of God’s grace and our absolute need for it. Garland says, “Most of us are fortunate that God does not deal with us on the basis of strict justice and sound economics and that ‘God pays his servants neither by time nor piece-work but by grace.’”³¹ However, this is not the main point

1992), 501.

²⁵ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 811.

²⁶ Craig Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 484.

²⁷ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 748.

²⁸ Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 37. Although Jeremias’s stereotype of “Orientals” as “indifferent” and “lazy” is shocking.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

³⁰ Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 62.

³¹ David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel*, vol. 1 of *Reading the New Testament Series* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys,

of this parable. God's grace is present in the parable, but Jesus is doing something else with this story. Furthermore, if we are going to use this parable to teach that our reward is undeserved, then we have a problem with the first set of workers who are told to take what is theirs. Snodgrass and others have said we must perform "curious interpretative gymnastics" to make this the main focus of the parable.

Other Flawed Emphases

Because this parable breaks down the walls of what we consider the norm, many have tried to emphasize a certain aspect in order to explain away the difficult truths Jesus relates. Some have argued that the last-hour workers did as much in one hour as the others did the whole day. Such an explanation makes a parallel with a Rabbinic parable told after the death of a young Rabbi. A king hired many workers, one of which excelled the rest. The king went to spend the rest of the day with this excellent worker. At the end of the day, all workers were paid the same and the rest complained because the excellent worker only worked two hours. The king responded by saying that he had done more in two hours than they did all day.³² If this is Jesus' point then why does He not say that? Why the emphasis on His generosity? Trench is right when he says that such a reading "defeats the whole purpose and intention" of the parable.³³ The parable stings precisely because those who do less work receive the same wage.

Another explanation that removes the sting of the parable is that the manager paid each with a different denarius. Lapidé argues the Jews had a silver or bronze denarius and the Christian a gold denarius.³⁴ This may have descended from Thomas Aquinas's explanation that all workers received eternal life, but some will be

2001), 209. Garland is quoting W. A. Curtis. "We are fools if we appeal to God for justice rather than grace, for in that case we'd all be damned." Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC 22 (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1992), 305.

³² Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 365.

³³ Trench, *Notes on the Parables*, 84.

³⁴ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, trans. James E. Crouch, *Hermeneia* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2001), 529.

closer to God.³⁵ If Lapide's explanation is true, then the complaint of the first workers makes no sense. If they did not know it was a different denarius, then why did the landowner not tell them? It would be better to focus on the context of the parable to better understand its difficulty than to go looking for something to explain it away.

Context is Key

To fully understand Jesus' point in this parable, we must consider the full context of Matthew's narrative which begins with the rich man approaching Jesus in 19:16. The young man was religious. He was wealthy. He was interested in serving Jesus. What a boon this might be to the growing movement. The problem was that the young man was too attached to his wealth and to serve the Lord fully nothing can stand between us. This young man could not leave everything behind. In 19:27, Peter steps forward and asks, "We have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" Jesus does not rebuke his "mercantile" attitude, but answers his question. He says that the apostles will have a role in the revelation of the will of God and its relation to the kingdom (19:28). But everyone who leaves their lives behind for Him will receive a reward.

Jesus follows this with what seems to be a warning: "But many who are first will be last, and the last first."³⁶ The fact that this phrase is used again at the end of the parable in 20:16³⁷ (but in reverse order) tells us that the parable should be read in light of this principle.³⁸ With Peter's question and Jesus' warning in mind, what does this parable teach?³⁹

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ I am obligated to comment on the unfortunate chapter division at this point. The parable is clearly connected to what precedes it.

³⁷ It is likely that the phrase "for many are called but few are chosen" was "added here by copyist who recollected the close of another parable." Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 2002), 41.

³⁸ Morris, *Matthew*, 498.

³⁹ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 67–8 provide a long list of how this parable has been explained and used.

The Lesson from Laborers in the Vineyard

Like the Kingdom of Heaven, many come to work in the vineyard. Some come early, work all day, and offer great value to the landowner. Some come later, work for a while, and offer a little value to the landowner. Others come close to quitting time, work for an hour, and offer almost nothing to the landowner. The day is over, and it is time to be paid.⁴⁰ The landowner tells the foreman to pay the workers beginning with the last.⁴¹

This is where we must allow ourselves into the story. It is likely that this is where Peter was pulled into the story. As the full-day laborers are waiting to be paid, they see that the one-hour laborers are given a full denarius. Our eyes get big. Seeing this they assumed they would receive more, but they, too, received the same. How do you feel about that? Is it not natural to feel the disappointment of these first workers?

A good story pulls us in. Nathan's story lured David in and set him up for the lesson he needed to hear. The parable of The Prodigal Son lures us in as we sympathize with the plight of the wayward son or with the complaint of the older brother. So, this parable lures us in as we, almost naturally, align ourselves with those who worked all day or those who barely toiled at all.⁴²

One of the workers who had been there all day speaks up: "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat" (20:12). The landowner responded by reminding him of their agreement and his freedom to give his money to whomever he willed. The grumbler was correct, and the landowner did not deny that they had all been made equal. In a culture of honor, status, and rank this seemed unfair.⁴³ One did everything he could to climb

⁴⁰Leviticus 19:13 and Deuteronomy 24:14–15 demand a worker be paid on the same day, before sunset.

⁴¹I agree with Brown, *Matthew*, 228, who says that this detail is "necessary for the story to work." For Jesus to make His point, the first must see what the last are paid.

⁴²Brown, *Matthew*, 230 says "It disturbs us probably because we have identified in some way with the full-day workers, and we feel the affront of the landowner's generosity to those who seem less deserving."

⁴³See David DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2012).

the social ladder. These men had spent the entire day working just to be made equals with those bums who only worked an hour.⁴⁴

This is the Kingdom of Heaven. It is not based on our norms or standards, but on the wisdom and mercy of the King. This is not the kingdom of men, otherwise Jesus would have no need to teach on it. This kingdom is different, and everything will be reordered. This kingdom “will upset human status categories and assumptions.”⁴⁵ This is difficult “because we cannot detach ourselves from the ruling convention that rewards should be commensurate to the services rendered.”⁴⁶ Jesus warns Peter (and us) that our ideas of worth, rank, and compensation “will be stood on their heads.”⁴⁷ We are reminded that God’s ways are not our ways nor are his thoughts our thoughts.⁴⁸ We can appreciate one of Newton’s subtitles, “Not Business as Usual.”⁴⁹

Why would Peter align himself with the early workers? Because he and the rest of the eleven started at sun rise.⁵⁰ They were bearing the heat of the day. They had left everything. And they would have their reward. But it is the same reward as those who showed up after lunch and did not have as much to forsake.⁵¹ This will eat at someone who is concerned about rank as reward. How often did the apostles fight about who was the greatest among them?⁵² Even on the night of Jesus’ betrayal, they were still bickering about who held the number one spot. In Matthew 20:20–28,

⁴⁴ Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 209 gets to the root of our human nature when he says that if the full day workers returned to the vineyard the next day, they would probably wait till the eleventh hour and expect a full denarius.

⁴⁵ Brown, *Matthew*, 229.

⁴⁶ France, *Matthew*, 748.

⁴⁷ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 371–2. He continues, “The parable breaks any chain of logic connecting reward, work, and human perceptions of what is right” (377).

⁴⁸ Isaiah 55:8. Cf. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 70.

⁴⁹ Newton, *Fresh Eyes*, 47.

⁵⁰ We should recognize that this is not just a reference to the length of service, but the depth of one’s service and their sacrifice.

⁵¹ Keener, *Matthew*, 481, “The parable itself could point to many disciples who have forsaken ‘all,’ but also to the fact that even those who had the least to forsake will receive the same reward.”

⁵² Cf. Matthew 18:1 (parallels in Mark 9:34; Luke 9:46); Matthew 23:1.

just after this parable, James and John approached Jesus and ask for positions of honor!⁵³

How is Peter going to feel when a leper is given the same rank and reward? How is Peter going to feel when Saul, an enemy of Christ, is brought into the fold? How is Peter going to feel when John Doe enters the vineyard at 5:00pm and never preaches a sermon, never teaches a Bible class, and is never flogged for his faith? Morris says, “Peter and the rest of the Twelve have indeed left all for Christ, but they must not think that their priority in time gives them an overwhelming advantage.”⁵⁴ There is no doubt that Peter and the apostles are to be equated with the full-day laborers but they are warned as if Jesus said to them:

‘You have received the great privilege of coming into the Christian Church and fellowship very early, right at the beginning. In later days, others will come in. You must not claim a special honour and a special place because you were Christians before they were.’⁵⁵

Let us not be too hard on Peter because we usually put ourselves in the category of those who have labored long and hard. Garland says, “The parable frustrates those who consider themselves to be especially pious and looked forward to preferential treatment from God.”⁵⁶ It has been said by many that we often think of ourselves as deserving mercy while others deserve justice. Likewise, we may often consider ourselves fitting recipients of preferential status. This parable, this truth of the Kingdom of Heaven, this reordering can prove offensive to us who think that way.⁵⁷

Jesus’ warning is not a rebuke of desiring a reward. Jesus speaks of rewards we cannot even comprehend. His warning is that “it is wrong to set one’s mind on the rewards that will set one on a

⁵³ Earnhart, *Glimpses of Eternity*, 158 says, “The apostles had been for months perversely fascinated with which one would be ‘greatest in the kingdom’ and this same chapter tells of a carnal effort by James and John to elevate themselves above others.”

⁵⁴ Morris, *Matthew*, 498–9.

⁵⁵ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew Vol. 2*, NDSB (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2001), 260–1.

⁵⁶ Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 208.

⁵⁷ Brown, *Matthew*, 229.

higher level than others.”⁵⁸ The fact of the matter is that in comparison to the King we are all so worthless that to have a rank at all is to be blessed. He is so far beyond us in holiness, gentleness, and love that it would be foolish to try to rank ourselves. If all vineyard workers are on the same footing then we should remember that “in the kingdom where grace reigns supreme, the equality of the saints is significantly conditioned only by the priority of the last.”⁵⁹

Jesus’ statements before and after this parable sound like that of reversal. If we interpret it that way, then out of ten, first will become tenth, second will become ninth, third will become eighth, and so on. But based on the point of the parable and the complaint of the workers, we should interpret Jesus’ statement not as strict reversal but as the elimination of all rank.⁶⁰ Yes, Peter and the apostles had forsaken everything to follow Jesus, but Jesus says that all true Christians have done the same thing.⁶¹ Many have seen in this point an echo of 4 Ezra 5:42. Ezra was concerned that people who lived at other times may be at a disadvantage in the judgment and he is told that judgment is like a circle: “those who are last will not be behind, and those who are first will not be in front.”⁶² Also consider 2 Baruch 30:2: “And it will happen at that time that those treasuries will be opened in which the number of the souls of the righteous were kept, and they will go out and the multitudes of the souls will appear together, in one assemblage, of one mind. And the first one will enjoy themselves and the last ones will not be sad.”

What about me? Of course, I think I deserve what Jesus gives. I grew up in the church. I obeyed the gospel when I was 11. I am a gospel preacher. My father preached the gospel for 55 years. His

⁵⁸ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, WBC 33B (Dallas: Word, 1995), 573.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* If we have the humble attitude that Jesus teaches us to have, we would recognize that we are the last and that we are the ones who benefit from the abundance of grace shown those who worked only one hour.

⁶⁰ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 68 says, “The point seems to be not reversal but equality.” Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 223 says, “If all have identical rewards, then all numerical positions are interchangeable.” Nolland, *Matthew*, 813 reminds us of this language in Isaiah 40:4, “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low.”

⁶¹ Wilkins, *Matthew*, 665–6.

⁶² France, *Matthew*, 751.

two brothers are preachers. My grandfather was a preacher. My great-grandfather was a preacher. To all this the landowner would respond “Good work. And here is Bob. He just obeyed the gospel. Here’s a denarius for each of you.”⁶³ Am I going to respond like those in the parable? Because if I do, I begrudge the generosity of the Lord. Barclay’s comment is true, but difficult to accept: “In the Christian Church, seniority does not necessarily mean honour.”⁶⁴

This is difficult because of how our world works. If you put in the hours and the work, you receive the payment. When you are in line for a promotion and it goes to the rookie, it does not sit well. We must remember that Jesus is not talking about the kingdoms of the world. He is speaking of His kingdom, and His kingdom is one of grace, not merit. Is it not easy to question the sincerity of the dying nursing home resident who obeys the gospel? We can be guilty of what Morris warns: “there is always a tendency for those who have been followers of Christ for a long time to be suspicious of those who come later.”⁶⁵

There has been much debate over who Jesus has in mind as the eleventh-hour workers. Some argue that it is a reference to sinners and tax collectors. We certainly understand that some come to the vineyard from wicked places. Some have argued that it is a reference to Gentiles. We can imagine that this was on the mind of Matthew’s original readers. Most Jewish Christians would see themselves as the full day workers and the Gentiles as those who came late in the day. Of course, this parable has been used in reference to “death-bed confessions.” This would give comfort to those left behind that their loved one had “made it.” We may not be able to identify whom Jesus specifically had in mind—if anyone at all. The parable is told to those who are a part of “the establishment” as a warning that the grace they receive will also be granted to those who come any time after.⁶⁶

⁶³“We, who so easily think in terms of merit, may be in for many surprises when the God of grace bestows His rewards at judgment.” Kenneth Chumbley, *Christ Revealed: A Commentary on Matthew* (Chillicothe: DeWard Publishing, 2018), 331.

⁶⁴Barclay, *Matthew*, 261.

⁶⁵Morris, *Matthew*, 504.

⁶⁶Nolland, *Matthew*, 813 says “Those whom God has accepted on an equal footing

He Who Has Ears...

How are we to keep from developing an attitude of superiority in the Kingdom of Heaven? First, we must remember that we, too, are sinners. Let us not make the mistake of thinking we have earned anything. The first workers are in the parable to make the story work. Jesus is not saying that anyone has earned their reward or that He owes anyone anything. When we remember from where we have come and from what we were saved, we should be so enamored with our Savior that we are not concerned with what anyone else has received from the Lord. It is easy to say, "They don't deserve it!" as if we do.

Second, we must learn to love. Time would fail me to tell what the New Testament teaches about this. Simply consider what John had to say: John 13:34f; 15:12; 17:20f; 1 John 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11, 12; 2 John 5. We have received more than we could ever ask for, so we should rejoice that God also gives to others. It is not as if there is a limited amount of reward that must be rationed. Is this not the point of Jesus' three parables in Luke 15?⁶⁷ We might understand where the older brother is coming from, but we can never allow ourselves to act or feel as he did. We cannot look with envy on what our fellow workers receive.⁶⁸ Snodgrass summarizes this perfectly: "The life of God's kingdom with its focus on communal love cannot be experienced as long as we are comparing ourselves with others and calculating what is due us or being envious of what others receive."⁶⁹ Earnhart reminds us of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13:3: "To whom is this parable directed? Toward all who like Peter are dreaming of some great reward for some great thing done. He had to be reminded that even the greatest of sacrifices without love achieve nothing."⁷⁰

need to be accepted by other Christians as on an equal footing."

⁶⁷ Much could be said about the similarities between this parable and that of the Prodigal Son. See "Was Lost and Has Been Found": *The Parable of the Lost Sheep, Coin, and Son* in this book.

⁶⁸ The phrase in the Greek is "is your eye evil," which is an idiom used for jealousy. Donald Carson, *Matthew*, Expositor's Bible Commentary 9 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 484.

⁶⁹ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 378.

⁷⁰ Earnhart, *Glimpses of Eternity*, 160.

Third, we must remember that we are simply servants. Jesus relates this point with a short story in Luke 17:7–10:

“Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and recline at table’? Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink’? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’”

Like the parable of The Laborers in the Vineyard, this may not sit well in today’s culture. Our society preaches self-confidence and self-esteem. We expect praise and payment for a job well done. As servants of the King, we have work to do. The Bible’s repeated encouragement to remain humble should prevent us from presuming that we are owed anything.⁷¹ The example of Paul is instructive. Everything he surrendered, every mile he travelled, every beating he endured, every sermon he preached, every insult he heard, every sleepless night he spent worrying about his brethren and not once does he come in from the field and expect the master to serve him.⁷² We should learn to appreciate that we have the honor of serving the King. We are blessed to be in His presence.⁷³ May we never think that we have made ourselves more deserving through a little—or much—work in the field.⁷⁴

It is essential that we have and maintain a proper understanding of ourselves in relationship to God. We are simply laborers in the vineyard who have no right to demand anything. At the end of the day “we have only done what was our duty.” This must be our mindset. However, note how Jesus reacts to faithful service: “Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and

⁷¹ Matthew 18:4; Luke 14:11 (*cf.* Matthew 23:12); Romans 12:3, 16; Ephesians 4:2; Philippians 2:1–5; Colossians 3:12; James 4:6; 1 Peter 3:8; 5:5–6; Micah 6:8; *etc.*

⁷² *Cf.* Philippians 3:7–17.

⁷³ Kyle Pope, *Matthew*, Truth Commentaries (Athens, AL: Guardian of Truth Foundation, 2013), 666.

⁷⁴ Earnhart, *Glimpses of Eternity*, 159.

have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them” (Luke 12:37). The chain of command, the rank, hierarchy, and honor system of this heavenly kingdom are not at all like that of this world. Who would have thought it possible to attain glory by humbling oneself to the level of a lowly servant? Only a God who would don a servant’s towel and wash the feet of men who were too busy arguing who among them would be the greatest. When we are in the Kingdom of the Lord, we cannot concern ourselves with rank. We have only to rejoice that we reign with the king (2 Tim 2:12).

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Count the Cost: The Radical Demands of the Kingdom

The Parables of Building a Tower and Going into Battle, the Pearl of Great Price, and the Treasure in the Field

Payton “PJ” Anderson

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross *daily* and follow me” (Luke 9:23; Matt 16:24).¹ Luke’s Gospel account of what Christ says here differs from Matthew’s account by only one word: *daily*. This word emphasizes the serious nature of the ongoing commitment that Christ expects from His followers. We often hear sermons preached and lessons taught from this passage making it clear that Christ expects His followers to understand the demands of the Kingdom. Do we truly appreciate the seriousness of such demands? Or do we sometimes compromise Christ’s standard in an attempt to make the Gospel more palatable to new disciples or to make our own faith more convenient? If we are going to follow Christ, we are going to have to meet the radical demands of the Kingdom. Being a part of the Kingdom of Heaven is going to come at a cost. Is that a cost you are willing to pay?

Three times in Luke 14:25–35, Christ uses the phrase “cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26f, 33). In each instance, this warning highlights Jesus’ main point: if you cannot meet the demands or pay the cost, you cannot be His disciple. A disciple (*mathetes*) is a

¹ All quotations from the Bible are taken from the ESV.

learner or pupil; disciples mold their lives after the example of the one they study under. In the time Jesus was active in His ministry and in the years well before, it was common for a disciple to sit at the feet of teachers like Socrates or Plato.² Others would sit at the feet of great Rabbis and teachers of the Law of Moses. These disciples would be students of their master's teaching, philosophy, and even way of life. Yet to be a disciple of Jesus is much different than being a disciple of a Jewish Rabbi or a skilled pagan teacher. Following Christ is going to demand you make sacrifices. You may be required to give up your family, your career, or your desires. These are the radical demands that Christ makes distinctly clear in Luke 14:25–35. Before getting into the parables, which serve as the focus of this lecture and series, we must first understand the context of these parables to truly appreciate the illustrations Jesus provides.

The Radical Demands of the Kingdom Stated

“Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:25–27).

Jesus' words “if anyone” (v 26) indicate the audience He had in mind.³ Everyone is included in the call to discipleship. It was common for Christ to have a large crowd following Him as He traveled (Matt 4:25; 8:18; 19:2; Mark 3:7f; 5:21; 10:1; John 6:2), and His message here was relevant to every person in the group of would-be disciples. No one was excluded from the Lord's invitation because there is no partiality with God (Acts 10:34; Rom 2:11), and the same is true today. Anyone is able to become a disciple if they can adhere to the demands of following Him.

Christ makes it clear that true disciples do not let anything get in the way of their devotion to Him, not even a relationship with

²Darrell Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, BECNT 3b (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 1285.

³James A. Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), entry 5516.

family. To adequately appreciate Christ's words, we must understand His use of the word hate (*misei*). "Hate," as used in this context, does not mean feelings of malice or harm.⁴ Throughout the Bible, there is never a command to loathe another human being.⁵ Such a command would be a contradiction of Christ's teachings, considering He commanded His disciples to love even their enemies (Luke 6:27–36; 10:25–27). We should understand His use of this word not as literal hate, but rather as loving less.⁶ In Old Testament passages like Genesis 29:31, 33 and Deuteronomy 21:15 where the word hate appears, it suggests a loving less or holding less value when compared to another.⁷ These instances of the word hate help us to see Christ's intention in Luke 14. Morris gives a summary of Jesus' words saying, "Jesus' meaning is surely that the love the disciple has for Him must be so great that the best of earthly loves is hated by comparison."⁸ We are commanded to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matt 22:39; Luke 19:18) and love one another as Christ loved us (John 13:34). We do not detest our family, but we do hate them in the sense that we love them less than we love the Lord. Family and those closest to us cannot interfere with our service and devotion to Christ, no matter how challenging it may be to make Him our top priority.⁹

Consider the cultural context in which Jesus is teaching. If you were a devout Jew during this time who decided to forsake the Law and follow the radical teachings of a fanatic who claimed to be the Messiah, you would essentially become an outcast. Bock writes,

⁴ Charles G. Caldwell, *Luke*, Truth Commentaries (Bowling Green, KY: Guardian of Truth Foundation, 2011), 814.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, 1284.

⁷ Caldwell, *Luke*, 814. Caldwell goes on to supply an example of this being played out in the Old Testament with the example of Jacob. Jacob was said to be "in love" with Rachel and "hated" Leah. The idea is not that Jacob hated Leah with malice and contempt, but that he preferred romantically that of Rachel. By Jacob's treatment of his two wives, it becomes clear that Rachel was "loved more" and Leah was "loved less."

⁸ Leon Morris, *Luke*, TNTC 3 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 253.

⁹ The challenges that come from elevating Christ over family were summarized from details that were expounded on by Green in his cultural insights of the family in ancient times. Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 565.

“At that time a Jewish person who made a choice for Jesus would alienate his or her family. If someone desired acceptance by family more than a relationship with God, one might never come to Jesus, given the rejection that would inevitably follow.”¹⁰ The exact situation Bock describes arises in the story of the man who was born blind but is miraculously healed by Jesus in John 9. When the Jewish leaders question the man and then his parents about how he had been healed, the parents do their best to avoid giving an answer (John 9:18ff). Thankfully, John includes a parenthetical statement informing readers why the parents respond this way. “His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, He was to be put out of the synagogue” (v 22). To be cast out of the synagogue at this time indicated to Jews that you were not only excommunicated by religious leaders, but also excommunicated by God Himself.¹¹ For that reason, many were too afraid to confess Christ as Lord or follow Him. It was a cost that many who heard Christ and saw His signs were unwilling to pay. The radical choice of choosing Christ over family in John 9 further illustrates the seriousness of what Christ is teaching in Luke 14. If you value the approval and acceptance of your family more than the approval of Christ, that will be a stumbling block to discipleship.

Christ takes the demands further than just a hatred of your family, explaining it is also a complete surrendering of yourself before Him (Luke 14:27). We must be willing to give up our own lives and learn to love Christ more than we love ourselves. The ways of Christ must reign supreme in every way in your life, until there is none of self and all of Him.¹²

The demands reach the climax in the consideration of the cross. The punishment of the cross had been in full effect for

¹⁰ Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, 285.

¹¹ J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 554–55. Michaels provides good insight into the cultural setting of synagogue life and worship. He explains what it meant for the parents if they were to confess Jesus as the Messiah in the setting of John 9 and being questioned by the Pharisees.

¹² For a more sobering and extensive read on this thought, all should take the time to read *The Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Although I do not agree with

nearly a quarter of a century before Jesus said these words in Luke 14, so His audience would have understood exactly what He was saying.¹³ His demands were outlandish; to be a disciple of Christ means you bear your own cross. “Bear” (*bastazei*), used in the present indicative form suggests that of a continuous action.¹⁴ The same word is used in John 19:17 as Jesus bore a cross and walked to His death. Likewise, disciples of Christ follow with a willingness to bear whatever pain and persecution is necessary. Today, disciples must be willing to sacrifice their lives daily for the cause of Christ (Luke 9:23). What higher demand could Christ make than this?

Jesus sets the bar for discipleship high. Give up your family, and give up your life. Take up your own cross. If you cannot do that, you cannot be His disciple. These are the radical demands of the Kingdom.

To help us better understand these demands and whether or not we are prepared to meet them, Jesus provides two illustrations in the form of parables: the building of a tower and the king going to war. Both illustrations are constructed in the form of rhetorical questions, indicating that the answer and application should be clear and easy for all to see. Unlike some parables where the meaning is hidden or concealed, these parables are somewhat unique in that they are easy to understand.

The Demands of The Kingdom Illustrated: The Parable of Building a Tower

“For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who

everything theologically that Bonhoeffer fought for, this quick read illustrates the depth and sacrifice he was willing to make for the cause of Christ.

¹³“The Romans crucified hundreds of followers of the rebel, Judas the Gaulonite... Crucifixion was a common spectacle both before and after that date.” A quote such as this shows that the listeners of Christ would have understood the implications of Christ choosing to use the word cross. Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1952), 400.

¹⁴Caldwell, *Luke*, 816.

see it begin to mock him, saying, "This man began to build and was not able to finish" (Luke 14:28–30).

This parable warns disciples to think about what they are getting themselves into before it begins. Anyone who is desiring (*thelo*),¹⁵ or makes it their aim or will to begin an endeavor, must count the cost. Before beginning construction, the prudent and wise thing to do is to evaluate the situation at hand. Some calculations need to be done. What am I trying to accomplish? How much is it going to cost? Will I be able to finish what I start? Proverbs 24:3–6 speaks about the wise builder and how he acts. The wise man builds the house only if he has enough funds to finish. He must know the sacrifice a task is going to take prior to beginning. That is why he must sit down and count the cost before building a tower.¹⁶

The type of tower that Jesus is illustrating in this parable is never specifically mentioned because the type of tower is not the focal point. It may be a military tower or a watch tower in a garden.¹⁷ However, the tower Jesus had in mind was clearly a large one, considering it needed a foundation. Christ illustrates that building a tower was an expensive endeavor a builder should not begin flippantly, and making the decision to follow Him is likened to that of undertaking this major project. We must assess whether we are ready before taking on the sacrifice and demands required to follow Jesus.

The consequences of not being able to finish what is started will not give the builder any benefit. There is no reward, profit, or protection in an unfinished tower. The only gain a builder has in not finishing what he started is a reputation for being a fool. "This man" (*houtos ho anthropos*) is a derogatory phrase here (Luke

¹⁵ "Desiring" (*thelo*) is a word that is associated with the intention of an individual. Caldwell, *Luke*, 817.

¹⁶ "Sit down" (*kathisas*) is a word that designates an intense contemplation so that one can act prudently.

¹⁷ Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979). From the definition provided, Arndt and Gingrich suggest that the phrase "build a tower" may also mean a watch tower or a farm building.

14:30f).¹⁸ Jesus uses the phrase to highlight the public shame that would come upon a fool who makes this mistake. The parable gives a graphic picture of failing to count the cost and the embarrassment of taking on a project that is never completed.

Throughout the years 1803–1815, thousands of Scottish soldiers and sailors lost their lives fighting in the Napoleonic Wars.¹⁹ Shortly after the war, a national monument was planned to honor those who had lost their lives. The monument would be constructed in Edinburgh, the capital of Scotland. The monument was designed to look like the Parthenon in Athens, with the hope that this would make Edinburgh the “Athens of the North.” Sadly, the attempt at beauty and grandeur failed. George IV was only able to lay a foundation and erect 12 grand columns before the money dried up and the building stopped. A monument that was intended for glory is now a roofless shell for tourists to climb on and known by locals as Edinburgh’s disgrace, Scotland’s folly, or Scotland’s shame. The monument in Scotland serves as a perpetual and permanent reminder of the exact situation that Christ warned about in the parable of building a tower.

Christ warns that when others look and see that a builder was not able to finish, they would begin to mock him. That word “mock” (*emaizein*) is a severe type of mockery. The only other times this word is used in the New Testament it is in reference to the mockery and verbal abuse that Christ received while on the cross, or that He used to foreshadow His own death (Matt 20:19; 27:29, 31, 41; Mark 10:34; 15:20, 31; Luke 14:29; 18:32; 22:63; 23:11, 36). One such example is in Matthew 27:29, “and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on His head and put a reed in His right hand. And kneeling before Him, they mocked Him, saying, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’” See the embarrassment, the ridicule, the humiliation. How unpleasant it is when others think of you as a fool. Yet, one of the main points of this parable is that all of this could have been

¹⁸ See where this phrase is said to Jesus in Luke 23:4, 14, 22, 35. The same construction is used also in Luke 5:21; 7:39; 13:32.

¹⁹ David McLean, “Lost Edinburgh: Edinburgh’s Disgrace,” *The Scotsman* (17 February 2014): <https://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle-2-15039/lost-edinburgh-edinburgh-s-disgrace-1-3308927>.

avoided. Furthermore, such mockery should be avoided in our lives today if we practice what Christ is suggesting. We need to sit down and carefully count the cost of what we are getting ourselves into when deciding to follow Him.

The Parable of Going to War

“Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace” (Luke 14:31f).

Like the parable of building a tower, the parable that immediately follows starts with a rhetorical question. The answer is obvious, clearly no wise king would rush to war without doing proper planning. Also similar to the parable in the preceding verses, the solution is to sit down. Jesus uses the same words to say the king needs slow down and contemplate what he is about to do. Before the king rushes his army and nation to war, he needs to thoroughly think this decision through. A decision of this magnitude should not be a hasty one. He knows the size of his army and the army that comes against him. There is no wisdom in going into conflict when the enemy has such superior strength.

We must keep in mind the nature of parables; they are earthly stories with a heavenly meaning.²⁰ As readers, we might be tempted to see the deeper meaning of this parable as counting the cost before going into spiritual battle, but that would be a shallow understanding. Consider how in the parable of building a tower, the builder is free to do as he chooses. He has the option to build or not to build. Whereas in the second parable, the king is going out to war. A consequence is impending whether the king likes it or not, and how this king handles the situation will mean devastation or peace. In the first parable, Jesus’ lesson is to sit down and consider the cost of following Him. In the second parable, Jesus’ lesson is to

²⁰ Paul Earnhardt, *Glimpses of Eternity: Studies in the Parables of Jesus* (Chillicothe, OH: DeWard Publishing, 2012), 6.

sit down and consider if you can afford to refuse His demands.²¹ For the king going out to war, he is unable to ignore the situation at hand, and he is forced to act.

The way in which this parable is told makes its application to us challenging. The majority of scholars and commentators would agree that the object of the parable is the first king, and we must see our situation as relevant to his. We must make a decision with prudence and care. The challenge in understanding this parable is identifying who the second king represents. There are two main lines of thinking. Some take the view that the second king is Satan. Certainly, Satan is one that we are at war against spiritually, so maybe the summary is that Satan is the enemy, and we must deliberate the cost of serving the Lord. A better view, taken by Caldwell and others, is that the second king represents God. God is the mightier king and mightier force. Many people of the world, and even children of God, rebel and oppose the king without stopping to consider the cost of their actions. When that is the case, they rarely stop and send delegation to ask for terms of peace.²² In realizing the might of God, we should fall to our knees and appeal to His grace rather than vainly fight against Him.²³ The parable of the king going to war not only deepens Jesus' words of caution for counting the cost, but also the subsequent need for wisdom in our decision-making.²⁴

“So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:33). Here, Jesus reaches the conclusion. You must hate your family. You must hate your own life. You must count the cost and choose wisely. You must give up everything to be a disciple of Christ. Jesus wants followers who are willing to give up everything for Him and who will gladly meet the radical demands of His Kingdom. Those who are not willing are

²¹ A. M. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (London: SCM Press, 1960), 65.

²² Caldwell, *Luke*, 822. Caldwell brings out a good argument for the second king representing God over Satan. Considering that the preferred course of action offered by Jesus is to send for delegation and ask for terms of peace, why would we be asking for terms of peace with Satan? If we take such a view, that is something to be pondered.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Bock, *Luke*, 1289.

the disciples full of form and no substance warned about in Luke 14:34f. They appear to be salt, yet they are good for nothing. We have to be willing to sacrifice everything, properly counting the cost of what it takes to follow Christ.

Is the Kingdom Worth the Sacrifice?

But who would give up everything to follow Him? What would motivate people to deny themselves and follow Christ? That is where it is important to not only stress the demands of the Kingdom, but also the blessings of the Kingdom. We need to tie in two other parables to help illustrate why the Kingdom is worth the sacrifice (Matt 13:44ff). If Jesus is telling the truth,²⁵ then although the demands of Luke 14 may be radical, there is nothing greater that man can receive than the blessings that come from following Him.²⁶ If the Kingdom of Heaven is as great as Jesus pictures it to be, it is worth the cost.

The Parable of Treasure in the Field

“The Kingdom of Heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field” (Matt 13:44).

In this parable, the Kingdom is likened to buried gold. When a man sees it, he instantly recognizes the priceless value of the treasure and surrenders everything without hesitation to make it his own. Like Jesus illustrated in the parables of building a tower and the king going to war, to follow Christ requires us to sit down and count the cost. Yet in the parable of treasure in the field and what follows in vv 45f, it becomes clear that the Kingdom of Heaven is well worth the steep demands.

Today, we might scoff at the idea of treasure being buried in the ground or think this sounds like something out of a pirate movie. No one would dare store treasure or anything of great value in the ground, would they? Remember the context and time in which

²⁵ Numbers 23:19; Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18.

²⁶ Bock, *Luke*, 1290.

Jesus speaks this parable. Jesus' audience was a part of a culture that was accustomed to war and nations conquering others, which made the ground one of the safest places to secure your valued goods. Consider another parable that Christ taught, the parable of the talents in Matthew 25. In that parable, v 25 points out that the worthless servant hid his talent in the ground.²⁷ It was common for someone to store up treasure or riches in the ground. The main danger in doing so, as this parable shows, is that what one man hides, another by chance may happen to find.

Imagine for a moment a man who goes home after finding such treasure begins to sell all that he has to buy a random field. At least, that is what it would look like to his friends and family. Earnhardt reflects on this saying, "Human nature being what it is, they probably told him plainly that he was crazy."²⁸ It did not matter because nothing stood in the way of this man selling all to buy this field. As outlandish as the parables may sometimes be, we need to appreciate the value that Jesus is placing on the Kingdom. The result of realizing such truth should be joy that in no way can be diminished by how much it costs. It is that joy that motivates this man and followers today to give up everything to make this treasure their own. This man gave up all that he had. That is what it costs to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Anyone is able to pay the price, but are you willing? This parable is Jesus pleading with us to not be ashamed of the price of the Kingdom because what we will receive in return cannot even begin to compare.²⁹

The Parable of The Pearl of Great Price

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it" (Matt 13:45f). Both of the parables cited in Matthew 13 liken the Kingdom of Heaven to a trea-

²⁷ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2*, DSB (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 84.

²⁸ Earnhardt, *Glimpses of Eternity*, 67.

²⁹ Ken Chumbley, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1st ed. (Nashville, TN, 1999), 258. Chumbley adds to this by saying, "This man joyfully sold all, without regret or compliant, for he knew what he gained was worth far more than what he gave up."

sure or object of great value. To the people of Palestine, a pearl was the greatest of all possessions.³⁰ Merchants would tirelessly scour the marketplaces in search of a rare and beautiful pearl. Many in Jesus' audience would commonly search the shores of the Red Sea.³¹ Dedicated seekers would always be looking in hopes of finding a pearl of great value. In comparison, Christ is illustrating that the Kingdom of Heaven is the greatest thing this world could possibly offer. As the parable of the pearl brings out, there are a number of pearls available, but there is only one that is of great value. The Kingdom is that which surpasses the value of all that is compared to it. Its value exceeds whatever the cost may be, making it easy for someone to sacrifice all to lay hold of such a possession.

What a bad deal, though. No one in their right mind would sell everything to get one thing in return. What wife would be happy if her husband did that? What father would be happy if his child did that? This is radical. This is extreme. If you give up everything, what do you have left for yourself? That's the challenge of these four parables and where they converge. What price are you willing to pay? Christ accepts nothing less than everything, which means if you are going to be a part of the Kingdom of Heaven, you need to quickly realize demands of what entrance costs. Chumbley adds to this, "Every effort should be made to seek it, every possession relinquished to obtain it and no sacrifice considered too great."³² We are seeking a Kingdom that is more precious than anything this world could possibly begin to offer. Jesus is the master and we are the students, so we seek to imitate the example given to us by Christ. Who could understand the radical demands of the Kingdom better than Christ? The Son of God left the glories of Heaven to live on this earth as a man and gave His life to be slaughtered as a lamb on the cross. Through His death, burial, and resurrection, all men have access to the forgiveness of sins. Jesus calls us to live like Him, "whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2*, 87.

³² Chumbley, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 258.

cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:27). The apostle Paul summarizes the sentiment of this lecture well by saying,

“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (Phil 3:7–9).

Allow Both to Grow Together: The Impact of the Kingdom on the World

The Parables of the Tares, the Mustard Seed, and the Leaven

Jared W. Saltz

The parables of the Wheat and the Tares (Matt 13:24–30), the Mustard Seed (13:31f), and the Leaven (13:33), and Jesus' later interpretation of the Wheat and the Tares (13:36–43) all speak about the Kingdom of Heaven. The Kingdom which Jesus rules is not like those his hearers know and expect. Jesus' kingdom favors the poor rather than the rich, the meek rather than the prideful, the persecuted rather than the powerful (5:3–11). By presenting these three parables, Jesus introduces the kingdom and its power to influence, change, and protect the world, but the focus of his discussion remains with the Parable of the Weeds.

The Parable of the Weeds in the Field (as the disciples call it, 13:36) presents a seemingly simple story about why God allows the wicked to exist in world where his Kingdom is at hand (4:17). The parable seems simple at first because Jesus himself interprets it for us (13:36–43).¹ Since Jesus provides the identity of most of the characters and plot points, what is left to interpret? From the Church Fathers to modern commentators, students of this passage have largely agreed that the parable is meant to allay concerns

¹Ada R. Habershon, *The Study of the Parables* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1957), 124, notes that this parable has the longest explanation of any parable except for the Sower and yet still provides many difficulties.

about the presence and nature of the Kingdom in the face of difficulties. Although they differ on whether the parable is meant to primarily address concerns about church discipline or universalism, they take for granted certain elements of the parable that Jesus himself does not address.² Most assume the three most important, unanswered elements of the parable. Those that do attempt to address these questions answer them from insights drawn from modern contexts and ignore the most obvious connection to Jesus' own audience—the Old Testament, itself. This approach causes obvious problems. As W. F. Albright noted, “sometimes a parable causes difficulty because of the dissimilarity between the common assumptions shared by the parable and its inaugural audience and the social customs of its later readers.”³ In the short space I have, I hope to shed light on the motives and actions of the Enemy, the Slaves, and the Master by reconsidering the parable of the Weeds according to Jewish and Judean contexts of Jesus' hearers and comparing them to Deuteronomy 22:9 and Leviticus 19:19.

The Context of the Wheat and the Tares

The center of Matthew's Gospel lies in the “Third Discourse,” where Jesus went first to the shore and then—as the crowds grew large—onto a boat in order to teach seven stories which we call parables. In Matthew 13:1–43, Jesus tells parables of *growth*, all but one of which have an agricultural setting. One of the most famous parables, the Parable of the Sower (13:3–9, 18–23), opens this discourse and Jesus quickly announces why he chose to teach this way (13:10–17, 34f): parables were a way to conceal Jesus' purpose and the true nature of things from those who were unwilling

²Robert K. McIver, “The Parable of the Weeds among the Wheat (Matt 13:24–30, 36–43) and the Relationship Between the Kingdom and the Church as Portrayed in the Gospel of Matthew,” *JBL* 114 (1995): 643–59, provides an excellent history of scholarship and summary of the sub-categories of these two positions which is quite helpful even if one does not accept his conclusions. John F. Cornell, “A Parable of Scandal: Speculations About the Wheat and the Tares in Matthew 13,” *Contagion* 5 (1998): 98–117, provides a niche, individualist and psychical interpretation to insist the parable is about individual temptation but his thesis has not convinced many.

³William Foxwell Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew*, AB (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971), cxxxii–cxxxiii.

or unable to receive them while still revealing those same things to those who were able to receive them. The crowds whom Jesus addresses are part of “this generation” (11:16–24) to whom he does not give the “secrets of the kingdom” (13:11).⁴ It is no surprise that Jesus separated giving the parables to the crowd and an explanation of the Weeds by emphasizing that this was the very purpose of speaking in parables (13:34f).

Most of the parables Jesus spoke to the crowds follow the typical pattern of short, directed stories drawn from typical life and focused on a primary point. The point of the parable most often comes from that element of his story which was the strangest.⁵ The two parables that Jesus tells in between the Weeds and its interpretation fit this model: the Mustard Seed and the Leaven.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed (Matt 13:31f) speaks of the “smallest of seeds” which grows into the “largest of plants.”⁶ This image of radical and unexpected growth is connected to the kingdom in several ways. Most obviously, this plant which grows up has “birds nesting in its branches.” Trees which give shade and protection to those around them were a well-known image for kingdoms in the Old Testament: Jotham makes this point when he speaks against Abimelech (Jdg 9:7–15); God compares Israel’s growth to a cedar sapling which will grow in which birds will nest (Ezek 17:22–24; cf. 31:3–14); and Daniel compares Nebuchadnezzar and

⁴D. A Carson, *Matthew*, EBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 300, makes this exact point and adds that this is the only of the five major discourses in Matthew which does address the crowds at all.

⁵Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963) was a major cause for the shift towards this sort of reading of the parables. Previous to his and C. H. Dodd’s work, total allegorization had been the most common hermeneutic, which often led to overwrought readings of most parables. Since Jeremias, newer approaches such as Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), have demonstrated that even simple parables can be multivalent, but generally there is a single primary function.

⁶One should note that the size of mustard seeds was proverbial rather than scientific. For example, Mishnah Niddah discusses impurity and asks how much of an unclean substance is required to render something unclean and concludes, “However small the quantity, even if it is only the size of a mustard seed, or even less!” (m.Nid 5.2). Donald A Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, WBC (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 386, notes that this same image and imagery is used in several author ancient authors as well, such as m.Toh 8.8, Antigonus of Carystus 01, and Diodorus Siculus 1.35.2.

his rule as king to a tree which gives shade to animals and in whose branches birds nest (Dan 4:7–23). That the Kingdom of Heaven would grow to such a height was never in doubt to Jesus' audience, nor that it would surpass all of the kingdoms of men (*cf.* Dan 2), but that it would arise from such a humble beginning unexpected. The crowds hearing this parable would have agreed with the conclusion, but how could it come from something as ignominious as a mustard seed? And why a mustard plant rather than a mighty cedar?⁷

Jesus followed up the Parable of the Mustard Seed with another which is obviously similar. Both the Mustard Seed and the Parable of the Leaven (Matt 13:33) feature something small and insignificant which have disproportionate results. The small seed grows into something mighty in size, the insignificant leaven permeates and transforms the dough into bread. As D. A. Carson notes, “In both parables it is clear that at present the kingdom of heaven operates, not apocalyptically, but quietly and from small beginnings.”⁸ But there is something more here, as well. This is the last parable that Jesus addresses to the crowds in this context before turning to the disciples to reiterate why he teaches in parables (13:34f) and to interpret the Weeds (13:36–43). When set alongside these events and Matthew's general narrative, it seems likely that Jesus says that the Kingdom will *transform* those who truly hear his words, and they will then transform the world through their influence (*cf.* 5:13–20).⁹

But if we are correct to say that parables are short, directed stories drawn from typical life focused on a primary point, two of the *other* parables that Jesus tells in this context are not so simple. For both the Parable of the Sower (Matt 13:3–9) and the Parable of the Weeds (13:24–30), Jesus gives considerably more detail than is typical (13:18–23). But he also provides allegorical interpretations to his disciples after he has moved away from the crowds (13:36–43).¹⁰

⁷ Carson, *Matthew*, 317–18.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 319.

⁹ Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 388–89, however, thinks this may be over-reading.

¹⁰ J. W. McGarvey, *Matthew and Mark*, New Testament Commentary (Delight, AR: Gospel Light Publishing Co., 1875), 122, notes that Jesus only interprets two of the parables to the disciples because the others were so simple as to not be easily misun-

The Parable of the Weeds, like its neighboring parables in Matthew 13, speaks about the Kingdom. Jesus says:

The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed proper seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. The master's slaves came and said to him, "Master, didn't you sow proper seed in your field? Why does it have weeds?" He said to them, "An enemy has done this." So the slaves responded, "You want us to go and uproot them, right?" But he said, "No, because then you would uproot the wheat while gathering the weeds. Instead, let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, 'Uproot the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn'" (Matt 13:24–30).¹¹

This parable occurs only in Matthew and perfectly suits Matthew's emphasis on the Kingdom.¹² It is a fitting sequel to the Parable of the Sower and a fitting introduction for the Parables of Mustard Seed and Leaven. The Sower and Weeds share an agricultural theme and vocabulary (sowing, seeds, soil, kingdom) and contextual themes (obstacles to growth, work of the devil, and the inevitable victory of God), many of which are also seen in the intervening parables.¹³

derstood. More time spent in some commentaries or some church classes causes me to doubt this assertion.

¹¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. In this case, I have expanded the translation slightly in order to emphasize and clarify certain elements of the interpretation.

¹² David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NCBC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 223, notes that four of the seven parables included in this Matthean discourse are exclusive to Matthew (Weeds, Pearl of Great Price, Hidden Treasure, and the Dragnet) while two Synoptic (Sower and Mustard Seed) and one occurs only in Matthew and Luke (Leaven). One major question that has concerned commenters on this passage is how the Parable of the Weeds relates to the parable of the Automatic Soil that occurs in the same place in Mark (4.26–29). This question lies outside of the purview of this essay, but I generally agree with the approach of David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus*, The Jesus Library (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 57, who notes that "Jesus must have used similar teaching on many different occasions, sometimes repeating himself word for word, sometimes varying his wording for emphasis." Hill, *Matthew*, 230, also recognizes that the parable of the Weeds better suits Matthew's context since Mark's parable "gives the impression of uninterrupted progress and growth on the part of the Kingdom, whereas Matthew is concerned at this point to affirm the eventual harvest of the Kingdom in spite of disappointments, setbacks, and loss."

¹³ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, Mat-

Some parts of the parable seem relatively straightforward even if others are more difficult. But before beginning to interpret the parable we should first consider the interpretation that Jesus has already provided to the disciples who asked him to explain it (13:36). Jesus explanation makes clear that this parable should be interpreted as an allegory, and he is kind enough to identify most of the parts:

The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed are the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear (13:36–43).

Even before Jesus provided his interpretation to the disciples, it seems likely that everyone understood the parable to be about the Kingdom and its interaction with the kingdoms of men leading up to the eschaton. Jesus sets up the dichotomy from the first verse by explicitly stating that he is addressing the Kingdom of Heaven which always conflicts with the kingdoms of men. Beyond this, the vocabulary he employs is typical of apocalyptic literature: the harvest is a frequent metaphor of judgment (4 Ezra 4.28–32; 2 Bar 70:2), and God's chosen and rejected are often portrayed as the produce of the field in the Old Testament and Intertestamental literature alike, which tended to emphasize one's predetermined place as righteous or wicked (e.g., 1QS 2:4; 4:17; Pss Sol 17:21–32). Even without Jesus' interpretation, the broad strokes are fairly straightforward: God permits the righteous and wicked

them 8–18, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 408. Ada R. Habershon, *The Study of the Parables* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1957), 124, however, focuses more on the differences such as where the Sower parable makes the seed represent the word but in the Weeds parable it represents those who received it, etc. Claus Westermann, *The Parables of Jesus in the Light of the Old Testament*, trans. Friedemann W Golka and Alastair H. B. Logan (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 186, provides a helpful grouping of these two and several other parables as parables of growth.

to coexist, sometimes indistinguishable from each other, until at last they will be separated, the wicked to destruction and the righteous to reward.¹⁴

Jesus' interpretation identifies most of the characters from the parable and each identification emphasizes the eschatological character of the parable. The Son of Man is a common title for Jesus, often connected with judgment (e.g., Dan 7); the sons of God and sons of the Devil are a common dichotomy in contemporary Jewish literature (1 QS 3:19–23; 4:15–26; *Wisd* 4:3), and angels who come at the end of the world to bring them to judgment makes this quite clear (*T. Ab.* A 10–14).¹⁵ But Jesus does not identify all of the actors or actions of the parable. The slaves of the master play a central part in the parable itself, asking questions of the master and raising questions about the seed and its treatment, but do not appear in the interpretation.¹⁶ The enemy is identified as the devil, but the *motive* for his actions is left unidentified. I would suggest that the motive is the key to our understanding of the parable.

What Kind of Weeds?

Most commentators who describe the actions of the Enemy base their understanding of his motive on their understanding of the physical qualities of the weeds. There are two popular approaches. The first interpretation understands that the Enemy sows the crop with seed for poisonous weeds that will cause pain to the Master and all of those who eat of the crop. The second approach suggests that the Enemy sows the crop with seed in order harm the wheat crop by stealing light, water, and nutrients. The Enemy further chose this particular type of seed because its resists elimination thanks its appearance (which is similar to wheat) or its stronger, more developed root system.

¹⁴Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 198.

¹⁵Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 348, also notes the strong eschatological emphasis of these terms and concepts.

¹⁶Leslie H. Bunn, "The Parable of the Tares: Matt. Xiii. 24–30, 36–43," *ExpT* 38 (1927): 562, suggests that the slaves in this parable (as in others) are not engaged in the action because they are like the chorus of a Greek drama, representative of the crowds and asking questions *for* the crowds but otherwise detached.

W. Oesterley represents the first approach. He suggests that the weeds Matthew describes (*zizanon*) are the same as the genus *loium temulentum*, a “pseudo-wheat” which looks much like wheat in the early stages of its development, but whose seeds are poisonous and have a “strong narcotic effect” if eaten.¹⁷ The Enemy’s goal, presumably, in sowing these seeds in the field is to harm those who might bread made with some of these seeds mixed in, namely the master and the slaves. J. R. C. Cousland attests to the tares’ toxicity and describes how, if they reached a certain dose, they could kill animals and cause headaches, sickness, and vertigo in any humans who consumed the *loium*.¹⁸ Because of this danger, the slaves suggest that they uproot the weeds (Matt 13:28). This reading’s popularity is understandable: it explains the motive of the Enemy and it explains the suggestion of the slaves. But others have focused on different qualities of the weeds for their understanding of the text.

Carson represents the other primary interpretive strand: he sees the weeds’ danger not arising from their poisonous effects or any danger to the master. This interpretation strains the meaning of the parable since the slaves only show concern only for the weeds’ disastrous effects on the wheat and not for any effects on consumers. Carson does agree, however, that the weeds are darnel (*loium temulentum*) and that the *loium* can harm the wheat because “the roots of the two plants entangle themselves around each other; but when the heads of grain appear on the wheat, there is no doubt which plant is which.”¹⁹ Cousland provides data which could also vindicate this reading. According to his research, According to his research, if the *loium* is not uprooted, it can cause wheat losses between 17–62% because the *loium*’s root system robs the wheat of light, water, and nutrients.²⁰ Although ancient sources

¹⁷ W. O. E. Oesterley, *The Gospel Parables in the Light of Their Jewish Background* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1936), 61.

¹⁸ J. R. C. Cousland, “Toxic Tares: The Poisonous Weeds in Matthew’s Parable of the Tares (Matthew 13.24–30, 36–43),” *NTS* 61 (2015): 401–05, provides numerous testimonia from ancient Greek and Latin sources, as well as some more modern studies based on animal testing.

¹⁹ Carson, *Matthew*, 316.

²⁰ Cousland, “Toxic Tares,” 400–01. Simon J Kistemaker, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 37–40, seems to see this as the primary issue. Lytton John

do not attempt to provide specifics about how much damage *loli-um* could incur, early Roman authorities on farming such as Pliny (*NH* 18.155) do describe darnel “killing off” wheat or attest to its “unfortunate qualities” (cf. Vergil, *Georg* 1.153). Carson and others who take this view are able to explain the Enemy’s motive in a way that better suits the data and the concern the Master shows for the crop. It also explains why the Master would *stop* the slaves from uprooting the weeds: they would harm the crop as well because of either the similarity of their looks at this stage of growth or else the entangled roots (13:29).²¹ However, at the time of harvest, both of these issues would be ameliorated: the weeds would have changed their appearance, making them easier to distinguish and, if the wheat was uprooted, the growth of the grain was already complete and could be gathered without loss (13:30).²²

Every interpreter of this parable with whom I am familiar takes a variation of one of these two views. Most disagreements revolve around whether the Enemy’s actions were realistic or merely hypothetical.²³ Attempts to answer this question have ranged from anecdotal statements about the ancient Near East lacking any real data, to a question of late antique Roman Law, to descriptions of an incident in modern England.²⁴ Because the character of the weeds

Musselman, “Zawan and Tares in the Bible,” *Economic Botany* 54 (2000): 537–42, also provides a botanical survey for the identification of the darnel with useful references to ancient and modern, Middle Eastern sources.

²¹ Gerald Kennedy, *The Parables: Sermons on the Stories Jesus Told* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 44.

²² Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, WBC (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 382–95, notes that commentators are split on whether the appearance or the roots is the motivating factor and provides a helpful discussion of the main arguments along with a bibliography.

²³ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGNT (Bletchley, UK: Paternoster Press, 2005), 544–55, attempts to explain why this actions seems so far-fetched and says, “The complain is sometimes lodged against this parable that an enemy might burn or steal crows or sow salt in the soil, but hardly sow weeds. But this is to use images of enmity related to wartime hostilities. The appropriate images here must come from feuds among neighbors. The goal is rather to provoke than destroy,” which is a helpful note that recommends caution in transferring perception between cultures, even if I think he ultimately misses the point.

²⁴ Henry Alford, *Alford’s Greek Testament: An Exegetical and Critical Commentary (Volume 1, Part 1: Matthew-Mark)*, 5th ed. (Grand Rapids: Guardian Press, 1976), 142–43, claims that the sowing of alternate seed was “an act of malice practised in the East”

is judged to be the key detail of the parable, the primary interpretive disagreements vary in the interpretation of the parable.

K. Snodgrass, in his excellent discussion of the parables, notes that the fundamental disagreement by scholars on this parable deals with whether it is meant to discuss growth of weeds inside of the *church* (and thus discussing issues of ecclesiology and church discipline) or within the *individual* (thus, universalism).²⁵ However, I think that perhaps these arguments miss the point of the parable. As intriguing as the identification of the botany Jesus described, the frequency or reality of this practice, and the ensuing interpretive choices made from these solutions, the most important conceptual framework has eluded students of this passage: sowing two types of seed in a single field.

Deuteronomy 22 and Leviticus 19: Sowing Two Kinds of Seed

Few portions of the Old Testament are as foreign to modern Christians as is the legal material. The cleanliness and mixture laws are often singled out as being particularly useless or irrelevant. However, a closer reading of these texts reflects a priestly Creation ethic which understood that God made each thing to reproduce according to its own kind and himself established firm boundaries separating different kinds of things from each other (Gen 1:24f).

and cites Roberts' *Oriental Illustrations*, p. 451, which is in turn cited by Trench, *On the Parable's* p. 68, but I have not been able to track down any such practices in primary sources. Alford, however, does include an amusing anecdote which occurred to him, where a disaffected tenant sowed his field with charlock over the wheat and how he responded in suit. A. J. Kerr, "Matthew 13.25. Sowing Zizania Among Another's Wheat: Realistic or Artificial?," *JTS* 48 (1997): 106–09, compares laws from the 6th century AD Roman Digest and other, earlier works in order to verify that the practice of sowing seed was practiced with enough regularity to require judicial rulings. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 219, however, notes that "at the agricultural level, the story is not very realistic, though such sabotage did occasionally occur." Charles Jerome Callan, *The Parables of Christ with Notes for Preaching and Meditation* (New York: J. F. Wagner, 1951), 63, seems to think this practice was common in the orient but provides no evidence to substantiate his claim.

²⁵ Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 162–65, gives a brief discussion on the history of interpretation among the Church Fathers, as well as a more focused discussion among modern interpreters, later, on pp. 165–67.

God had created order from chaos; mixing seed—whether in your fields, in your animal breeding, in your clothing, or in your harvest—was viewed as a return to chaos and an attack on God’s character and creative genius. It is just such an assault that Deuteronomy forbids when it records:

Do not sow your field with two kinds of seed, lest the full yield be dedicated, both the crop from the seed which you purposefully sowed as well as the vineyard itself. Do not plow your field with an ox and a donkey together. Do not wear cloth of two kinds of product, linen and wool mixed together (22:9–11).

A similar law is found in Leviticus:

Keep my statutes. Do not let your cattle breed with a different kind of animal. Do not sow your field with two kinds of seed. Do not wear a garment of cloth made from two types of material (19:19).

Both of these laws record the same three areas where mixtures are forbidden: animals, land, and clothing. But they are subtly different. Deuteronomy discusses animal use, whereas Leviticus discusses animal breeding. Deuteronomy speaks of vineyards whereas Leviticus discusses fields. Most modern commentators have assumed that the action of sowing two types of seed in a single field was done by a single individual, the owner, in an early attempt at share-cropping. As with many other cleanliness laws, many discussions of this law have attempted to interpret it along practical lines: share-cropping was less efficient for produce and this is why it was forbidden.²⁶ J. Tigay is right, however, when he notes that the question of efficiency is far less important than productivity because the fields which most Israelites would have harvested were small. Inter-cropping, sowing multiple types of crops in a single field, is actually a *better* use of the soil, particularly for subsistence level farms! In other words, the “practical” explanation for the ban on inter-cropping must be abandoned.²⁷ Once this reasoning is

²⁶Roy Gane, *Old Testament Law for Christians: Original Context and Enduring Application* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 342–45, suggests this as a course of events although he is not certain this is the case.

²⁷Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy = [Devarim]: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the*

abandoned, we should question whether the laws envision a situation where the owner is the one sowing the different seed at all. There is no reason to believe this is the case and good reason to believe it is not. The Hittite Law Collection records just such a situation in a law reminiscent to those in Deuteronomy and Leviticus:

If anyone sows his own seed on top of another man's seed, they shall place the perpetrator's neck on a plow, hook up two teams of oxen, turn the face of one ox in one direction and the other ox in the other direction, and thus the man will be put to death. Then the oxen will be put to death as well... (HL §§166–67).²⁸

Even in the Roman period, we can find a similar situation where a person maliciously sows tares or wild oats in another person's crops in order to spoil them and this too brings about serious penalty (Justinian, *Dig.* 9.2.27.14). These passages certainly seem similar to the parable Jesus sets before the crowds and the interpretation that he gives the disciples, later. I think that, with these passage in mind we are almost ready to return to the major questions that are left unanswered by Jesus because he assumes that his audience would have made the connection to these well-known Old Testament passage and understood the implications. First, however, we must address what solution is required by the Old Testament Legal Material in order to resolve a situation where two types of seed have been sown in the same field.

Holiness, Dedication, or Fire: *Kadash* in Deuteronomy 22:9

Deuteronomy notes that a field that has been sown with two types of seed must be “dedicated,” both the yield of the crop that came from it as well as the field itself (22:9). But what does “dedicated” mean? The Hebrew word that is translated “dedicated” comes from *kadash*, which HALOT glosses variations on to be holy, removed from common use, subject to special treatment, forfeit to

New JPS Translation (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 202.

²⁸ Translation adapted from Martha T. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, 2nd ed., *Writings from the Ancient World* 6 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 233.

the sanctuary, rendered to God, given as an offering, or transferred into a holy state.²⁹ R. Gane and J. Milgrom both suggest that, in this case, it means that the produce is forfeit to the sanctuary.³⁰ Tigay, however, notes that some rabbinic traditions demand the destruction of the field. Mishnah *Kilayim* comments on this text and describes a situation where accident caused seeds to grow in a vineyard of different seed and what must be done in these various situations:

If the wind blew the seed in front of him [into a vineyard], Rabbi Akiba says: If it has produced small shoots, he must turn the soil. If it has reached the stage of green ears, he must beat them out. If it has grown into grain, *it must be burnt* (m.Kil 5.7).

Of course, we should be careful when using rabbinic material, even from the Mishnah. It is not certain that Mishnaic texts are always same as they were originally or originate from the second temple period, let alone ancient Israel. There are several factors that make this interpretation more likely, however. First, this teaching is explicitly attributed to Rabbi Akiba, an early rabbi of the rabbinic period and such tend to be more reliable than earlier or later attributions. More persuasively, however, is the fact that even in the Old Testament “dedication” (often translated with some sort of word invoking holiness) is often tied to burning and fire.

In Exodus, Sinai is swathed in fire and God says that it is “dedicated” to him, and that any who were not “holy” and that he would break out against any who drew near to him (Exod 19:21–24). When Nadab and Abihu brought unauthorized fire, God consumed them with fire and explained that “Among those near me I will be considered holy” (Lev 10:1–3). The same ties between dedication and being burned happens during Korah’s rebellion (Num 16:25–35). God’s presence is frequently linked to holiness and dedication (e.g., Isa 6:1–6; Jer 17:27). Beyond this simple verbal link, the *concepts* of dedication and destruction or burning are frequently linked in

²⁹Ludwig Köhler et al., eds., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

³⁰Gane, *Old Testament Law for Christians*, 139; Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, Anchor Bible (New Haven: Yale UP, 2007), 1660–62.

the Old Testament thought-world. Burnt offerings are an obvious example, but it goes well beyond this. Leviticus notes,

Nothing that is devoted to the Lord, out of anything he has—man or beast or field—may be sold or redeemed. Every devoted thing is dedicated to the Lord. Nothing that has been devoted, or is promised to be devoted may be ransomed from destruction. It will be put to death (27:28f).

Numbers provides the same concept of devotion, this time for cities: “Israel vowed to the Lord and said, ‘If you will surely give this people into our power, then we will dedicate their cities to destruction’” (Num 21:2f). Jericho, Ai, and Hazor were, of course, all dedicated to God in fire (Jos 6:24; 8:28; 11:11). It seems fair, then, to suggest that Deuteronomy requires any field that has been contaminated by two types of seed to be totally destroyed, most likely burned with fire. With this understanding in place, we can now return to the interpretation of the parable.

Revisiting the Wheat and Weeds

Although Jesus identifies many of the characters and plot points in his parable, three main questions remain unanswered. Why would the Enemy sow tares in the field? Why do the servants ask whether they should uproot, and what do they suggest that they uproot? And, lastly, what does the Master do? Approaching the parable with Leviticus and Deuteronomy in the background shifts our answers on these questions.

Contrary to the common suggestion of modern authors, the Devil is not trying to weaken or kill human or animal consumers when he sows a second kind of seed into the Master’s crop. Jesus specifically states that the field is the world; the good seed are the inhabitants of the kingdom; the weeds are the people of the evil one (Matt 13:38). No one in the parable consumes the seed and any interpretation that requires such requires too much from the parable.

Nor does the Devil sow bad seed in the field merely to cause damage to the godly, whether by stealing those things which will nourish them or causing incidental damage when the weeds are

removed. This interpretation, although attractive to many, directly opposes the Master's actions and commands. If the Enemy was attempting to endanger the crop's production by sowing tares to steal their nutrients, why does the Master allow the tares to remain in the field until the harvest, resulting in precisely the Enemy's desired outcome? Some other motivation must drive the Enemy.

The Enemy's actions become clear once we understand the implications of the laws in Deuteronomy and Leviticus and the Jewish background of Jesus' audience. The Devil sows a second sort of seed to force God to destroy the crop. Satan desires to force God to destroy the world, the righteous along with the wicked. Such has been his desire from the beginning, and many have been his attempts (Gen 3; 6; 18–19; Exod 32; Num 13–14; Hab 1–3; Job 9:22; *et al*).

Perhaps this requirement—to devote the entire field to destruction because of some seeds—seems harsh. Perhaps the ease with which any enemy might ruin the harvest of the innocent seems unfair. Certainly it seems so to us, and I think it seems so to the crowds as well. The slaves in the parable, who often represent the thoughts of the crowds attending Jesus, offer to break the law, to counter this unfair situation and the plots of the Enemy, “What if we just uproot the *weeds*?” (Matt 13:28).³¹ The slaves seek to countermand the designs of the Enemy in the only way they know how. They seek to show grace and mercy to the innocent as best as they know how to in the greatest extent to which they can conceive. But the grace and mercy of the Master surpasses their wildest imagination.

When asked whether he wants his slaves to uproot the weeds from the field, breaking law and custom in service of the higher demands of the Law for mercy and discernment, the Master responds negatively. “No, I do not want you to uproot the weeds” (Matt 13:29a). But his response does not continue, “That would break the Law.” Instead, his negative response shows still greater concern for the innocent: “Lest, when gathering up the weeds you should

³¹ Throughout this short section, the included quotes are paraphrases intended to highlight the narrative and clarify the meaning. Although they are not translations, I have been careful to attempt to accurately capture the meaning of this interaction.

uproot the wheat as well” (13:29b). He commands further breaking of custom: “Let both grow alongside each other until the harvest, at which time I will command the reapers to fulfill the command and destiny of each” (13:30). Only after the wheat is gathered into the barn will the field be dedicated, only after the harvest will the weeds be destroyed, only then will the field be burned with fire, just as Deuteronomy required (13:30).

Jesus, Satan, Mercy, and the Law

The Law was meant to be enduring but not eternal (Gal 3:19–29). It was inspired (Luke 24:27; 2 Tim 3:14–16), and it was perfect for its intended purpose (Psa 1; 19; 119; Gal 3), but it was never intended to remain forever. The Law was given because of the hardness of the people’s hearts (Matt 19:8), but it was *meant* to soften them, and put them on a trajectory which would eventually lead them to Christ (Gal 3:23–29). A careful reading of the Law shows that it could and was *meant* to change and evolve, to grow along with the people. Indeed, this purpose is intrinsic to who Matthew represents Jesus in his Gospel, where Jesus is the one who comes to fulfill the law and transform the law because he is the only one who truly understands the law (Matt 5:17–48). The Law of Christ is different from the laws of men just as the Kingdom of Heaven is different from the kingdoms of men.

Of course, Satan has always seen Law and kingdoms both as things to be twisted and manipulated to his ends and thus both end up serving him. Satan twisted the Law to make us sin more and he twisted the Law the attempt to destroy God’s people. It is Satan who stands to accuse Joshua the High Priest of the sinfulness represented by his stained garments and his unworthiness to offer the sacrifices required to cleanse the temple before they could even cleanse the people (Zech 3.1, 3). But just as there the Lord rebukes the accuser and destroys his plans—cleansing Joshua’s sins cleaning his garments, plucking him like a brand from the fire (3:2, 4f)—so too does the Lord, here, save his own people from the fire.

Will He Find Faith? The Attribute of Persistent Faith

The Parables of the Friend at Midnight and the Unjust Judge

Mark Roberts

The very idea of prayer is dazzling. That mere creatures can contact their Creator with the expectation that He will not only listen but act on their requests is astonishing. Yet this is the promise of prayer contained in Scripture, and in particular, in the Gospel accounts. Jesus not only constantly prays but urges His followers to do the same. The issues of prayers' value, importance and priority are settled permanently by the Christ.

The reality is, despite its awesome value, prayer remains a struggle for many. Some struggles come from the difficulties of praying to an unseen and invisible God. Some of those difficulties arise because people do not always know what to pray for. Yet, without doubt, the majority of the issues people have with prayer centers on how it appears not to work, at least not as many believe it is supposed to work. The Bible's promises about prayer are huge and seem to offer almost *carte blanche* to those who sincerely entreat God. In harsh contrast is what happens sometimes after prayer—nothing. To be sure, fervent prayer can result in incredible and profound changes in diagnoses, life situations, adversity, and more. Yet fervent prayer may also be met with nothing but stony silence from above, and nothing changes. What happened? Did God

not hear? Should a person do something different to make Him hear and what would that be? Is the failure with prayer, with God or with the one praying?

In the fertile ground of uncertainty and suffering, false teaching is sure to arise. What about faith? If God did not deliver what was requested it must be because the one praying did not genuinely believe. One popular writer emphatically announces, “If you have faith, you will not fail; if you fail, it is a sign that you do not have faith.”¹ A second area of considerable confusion involves persistence. If we believe in God and prayer then all we need do, according to many, is just keep asking. If we beat on the door of heaven long enough God must relent and give us what we desire. P. T. Forsyth is certain that “Prayer is never rejected so long as we do not cease to pray. The chief failure of prayer is its cessation.”² These common “explanations” of the “failure” of prayer blame the one praying because we are reluctant to blame God. Yet one wonders how people bear the burden of guilt if their praying for a sick or suffering loved one is not answered with healing and health and they are told (emphatically) it is their fault? Will they end up blaming God? Will they give up on prayer and even faith?

Jesus offers something far better. His example of prayer (and let us not forget that shortly after Jesus spoke these parables God told His own Son “no,” see Luke 22:42ff) and His teachings on prayer guide us to a better understanding of what it is to communicate with our Creator. Further, precisely because we *can* question our faith Jesus tells two parables to encourage more praying and more faith even when prayer does not seem to be effecting anything. What matters most in those parables is that Jesus emphasizes the Father who answers, not what the one praying does or persists in doing. Both the parable of the Friend at Midnight and the Parable of the Unjust Judge encourage Jesus’ disciples to “always pray, and not to faint” (Luke 18:1).

¹Charles L. Allen, *Prayer Changes Things: How to Tap Man's Powerhouse of God's Strength* (New York: Revell, 1964), 55; cited by David Crump, *Knocking on Heaven's Door: A New Testament Theology of Petitionary Prayer* (Ada, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2006), Kindle edition, 15.

²P. T. Forsyth. *The Soul of Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1916), 7.

This lecture will examine these two parables to appropriate that message. Each parable will be looked at individually, and clear application of that parable's teaching will follow its analysis. We will see that both of Jesus' stories are fraught with original language and translation questions, and both have been terribly misinterpreted. There is a withering irony in Jesus using these parables to encourage confident praying and the same stories being used today to paint a picture of a God who is reluctant to grant our petitions and so must be hounded ceaselessly. That is why the goal of this study is to see how Jesus offers us a better way to understand prayer, to pray, and to believe in the promises God makes about our prayers.

The Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5–8)

The action of the parable in Luke 11:5–8 is not difficult to track. Set in Luke, the gospel that emphasizes Jesus' prayer life so much,³ the story is built on common life for common people in the first century. Many people in Jesus' world would have been poor, and at the end of the day there would be little or nothing left in the house to eat.⁴ Thus, when a visitor arrives in the middle of the night Jesus tells us the host has no bread for him. The host must go to his neighbor and ask to borrow bread. The neighbor does not want to help because the hour is late and it is inconvenient to get out of bed. However, he ends up giving the man what he asks.

While this appears simple at first, the parable is loaded with difficult questions. Most of those issues center on the word "shameless" (NIV) or "impudence" (ESV) in v 8. What exactly does that mean? The New American Standard Bible has "persistence" as its translation. Is there any basis for that rendering? Further, just who is being "shameless" or "impudent" here—the man asking for bread or the sleeping neighbor? Exploring these questions is essential to understanding the parable.⁵

³ See Leon Morris, *Luke*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 46.

⁴ J. A. Metzger, "God as F(r)iend? Reading Luke 11:5–13 & 18:1–8 with a Hermeneutic of Suffering," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 32 (2010): 39.

⁵ There are other matters of investigation in the parable. For example, Nolland and others discuss the parable's unity or whether it could even be two parables. See John Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, WBC 35B (Dallas: Word, 1993).

The term in v 8 that is translated so many different ways is the Greek word *anaideia*. This is the only place that term occurs in the New Testament. However extensive analysis of its use outside of Scripture makes its meaning quite clear. Snodgrass surveys 258 occurrences of the term outside of the Bible.⁶ His findings are “No positive use of this word ... occurs except where Christians have adapted it after the beginning of the second century.”⁷ Synonyms for *anaideia* include insolence, recklessness, disorder, crudeness, and even treason. It is a term that references outrageous and offensive acts. Snodgrass even notes “rather than being the avoidance of shame, it expresses an ignorance of shame and the absence of any sense of shame... The person guilty of *anaideia* does not know where the boundaries are.”⁸ Plutarch describes it as “the extremity of evil. For when *anaideia* and jealousy rule men, shame and indignation leave our race altogether.”⁹ Johnson’s analysis confirms Snodgrass’, as he summarizes, “In the first century there is no evidence that the word would have been understood as ‘importunity’ or ‘persistence.’”¹⁰ Ernest van Eck’s equally exhaustive survey of the use of *anaideia* reaches the same conclusion.¹¹ His mention of Josephus’ use of the term to describe a mother who ate her son during the Roman siege of Jerusalem¹² is particularly significant. Even more, he describes the stone in the Areopagus where the accuser stood, demanding the full penalty of the law against an accused murderer, as being the stone of outrage, literally the stone of *anaideia*.¹³

All of this leads to serious questions about the parable being used as a basis for urging persistence in prayer. There is no persistence

⁶ Klyne Snodgrass, “*Anaideia* and the Friend at Midnight,” *JBL* 116 (1997): 506.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 507.

⁹ Plutarch, *Moralia* 31.2, cited by Snodgrass, “*Anaideia*,” 508.

¹⁰ Alan F. Johnson, “Assurance for Man: The Fallacy of Translating *Anaideia* by Persistence in Luke 11:5–8,” *JETS* 22 (1979): 127.

¹¹ Ernest van Eck and Robert J. van Niekerk, “Life in its unfullness: Revisiting *anaideian* in the light of the papyrological evidence,” in *Ecodomy—Life in its fullness; Verum et Ecclesia*, Suppl 1.38 (3), a1647. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v38i3.1647>.

¹² Josephus, *Jewish War* 6.199.

¹³ van Eck, “Life,” 139.

in the parable. Even lacking an analysis of *anaideia* shouldn't the careful reader realize that the man knocking does not persist? He knocks once and receives his bread. He does not continue knocking and asking. He does not prevail through perseverance.

The other significant question that must be dealt with in the parable is who is *anaideia*? Who is behaving in this shameless, outrageous way? There are attempts to make the sleeping neighbor the shameless one.¹⁴ Anderson argues that the sleeper does not want to shame himself in the eyes of the community by refusing this request.¹⁵ Nguyen similarly, working from a background where family honor is extremely important, sees this parable about honor, even the community's honor, as the sleeper must show hospitality.¹⁶ However, it is not the sleeper who is engaging in conduct outside the boundaries of society. The man who knocks in the middle of the night is the one who is violating social convention and behaving outrageously. As Waetjen observes "It is the petitioner ... that has violated the boundary of courteous behavior."¹⁷ There are structural and grammatical grounds to support this conclusion,¹⁸ and even the flow of the contrast Jesus is driving for is disturbed if the sleeping neighbor is the shameless one.¹⁹

In short, the parable shows us a man who cannot take care of an unexpected guest, so he asks a neighbor for bread even though it is ridiculous and shameful for him to wake up his neighbor with such a request. The neighbor, however, cedes to his request because the man outside has no sense of propriety. If he does not give him the loaves he asks for what will he do next? Is it not better to give him some bread so he will go away?

¹⁴ See Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, rev. ed. (New York: Scribners, 1963), 157–58.

¹⁵ D. Anderson, "An Appraisal and Interpretation of the Friend at Midnight," *Calvary Baptist Theological Journal* 8 (1992): 27.

¹⁶ van Thanh Nguyen, "An Asian View of Biblical Hospitality—Luke 11:5–8," *Journal of the Chicago Society of Biblical Research* 53 (2008): 36.

¹⁷ Herman C. Waetjen, "The Subversion of 'World' in the Parable of 'the Friend at Midnight,'" *JBL* 120 (2001): 709.

¹⁸ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke X–XXIV: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, AB 28A (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 912.

¹⁹ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1060.

What Does The Friend at Midnight Mean for Our Praying Today?

Sadly, this parable's meaning has become badly distorted. God is likened to the sleepy neighbor who has to be roused through persistent knocking and shouting. The application to prayer is that we should simply pester God until He relents and gives us what we want. It worked for the man who needed bread and so it must work today. Finally, God will just give us what we want so we will go away. Surely such a dismal and discouraging message cannot possibly be what Jesus wanted us to hear when He was trying to encourage prayer.

Discouraging prayer by making God into an angry and indignant neighbor is the very opposite of what the parable is about. Jesus teaches that if a man will grant the ridiculous and inappropriate request of his neighbor *how much more* gladly will God give His children what they need? That is exactly what Jesus says next when He follows the parable by saying "I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you" (v 9). Jesus then discusses how earthly fathers want to give good gifts to their children, and so God will give His children the best gifts (vv 10–13). Snodgrass is on target when he says "nothing in the parable of the Friend at Midnight teaches persistence in prayer; rather, the parable teaches the certainty of a God who hears prayer and responds."²⁰ Crump's excellent observations conclude "The truth of Luke 11:5–13 is that God is the ideal parent who hears every child's request the first time and promises to respond at the right moment, in the best possible way."²¹

From the parable there may well be a secondary application to being unafraid to ask in prayer.²² If an irritated sleepy person responds to boldness then prayer today can also be bold with God.²³ That said, it is appropriate to note boldness can become shameless and inappropriate asking, and there is no place for demanding of

²⁰ Snodgrass, "Anaideia," 513.

²¹ Crump, *Knocking on Heaven's Door*, 76.

²² See Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 276.

²³ Bock makes this observation, *Luke*, 1058.

God. James offers a caveat about such praying (Jam 4:3). Thus, we may be best served by letting the parable mean that the “answers to prayer are not wrung out of the Father with much effort like water from a towel.”²⁴ The parable should give God’s children great confidence in prayer because it says “if in human circumstances a person pressed hard enough will respond to a request, even though reluctantly, surely God will answer and so far more graciously.”²⁵

The Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1–8)

After working through the Friend at Midnight the reader may feel ready to move to bigger challenges. The Parable of the Unjust Judge can rise to that occasion. Luke 18:1–8 is filled with difficulties of every sort. These would include how this parable gets retrofitted by the Friend at Midnight story even though “the Holy Spirit did not place them even close together and they are about very different components of prayers.”²⁶ On top of that, there are questions about the unity of the parable,²⁷ and Bovon finds six issues in how to translate the Greek.²⁸ All of that is topped by the obvious discomfort the reader experiences when it appears Jesus could be saying the Father is a grouchy judge.

Once again the action of the parable is not complicated. A widow needs justice. An unkind and godless judge refuses to help her. She, however, continues to bother him with her case, so he finally relents and grants her request (vv 2–5). Jesus then makes several observations about His parable, finally asking if when He returns He will find faith on the earth (vv 6–8). What does all of this mean, and what is Jesus telling us with this parable?

It is important to see that only here and in v 9 does Luke preface a parable with its meaning. We need to let Luke (actually Jesus) tell us what this is about. The parable begins with Luke adding “Jesus told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1060.

²⁵ W. L. Liefeld et al, *Luke-Acts*, EBC 10 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 206.

²⁶ Anderson, *Appraisal*, 30.

²⁷ S. Curkpatrick, “Dissonance in Luke 18:1–8,” *JBL* 121 (2002): 108.

²⁸ Francois Bovon, “Apocalyptic Traditions in the Lukan Special Material: Reading Luke 18:1–8,” *HTR* 90 (1997): 384.

pray and not lose heart” (v 1). This is a parable about not giving up, not quitting. Some will rush to make this about persistence in prayer and have Jesus saying “do not give up *praying*.” Yet that is not all Jesus says. He urges His followers to always pray *and not lose heart*. This is reinforced when at the end of the parable He closes this teaching by asking if He “will find faith” when He returns (v 8). Just this brief look at the parable should lead us to believe this is about enduring in the faith, not about how to beat a reluctant God into giving us what we want.

That conviction is strengthened when we see how the parable is tied to the preceding material. Again we go back to the beginning, where v 1 says “Jesus told *them*.” Who is “them?” They are the disciples of 17:37 who had just listened to Jesus talk in terms of God’s judgment and His coming. Jesus uses the term “Son of Man” four times (17:22, 24, 26, 30), the same title He employs in 18:8 as He sums up the parable. These connections are powerful because in chapter 17 Jesus discusses how His coming will result in the vindication of the righteous, just as in Noah and Lot’s day. When His disciples ask Him where these things will happen (17:37) Jesus tells the story of the Unjust Judge. Taken together, it becomes clear that this is about not giving up under the pressures and distress of persecution. Jesus is saying that just as the woman was vindicated (v 3) so God’s people will be vindicated (same word, v 7, translated “give justice” in the ESV). Just don’t quit, Jesus says.

A close look “under the hood” of the parable confirms these ideas. The judge of v 2 is despicable. He is the personification of what a judge must not be, according to Moses’ law. He should be defending widows²⁹ but instead arrogantly does as suits him. The second character, the widow, well symbolizes the helplessness many first-century disciples must have felt, especially under the duress of persecution. She is powerless and has no one to help her.³⁰ Coupling these two characters together is straight out of Isaiah 10:1f: “Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees, and

²⁹ See Exodus 22:22–24; Deuteronomy 24:17; Job 22:9, 24:3, 21; Jeremiah 7:6.

³⁰ Bock notes Luke’s concern for widows. See Luke 2:37; 4:25f; 7:12; 20:47; 21:2–4; Acts 6:1; 9:39, 41. Bock, *Luke*, 1448.

the writers who keep writing oppression, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be their spoil, and that they may make the fatherless their prey!" (ESV).

This widow needs deliverance or vindication from an adversary. We are not told her difficulty but the story assumes she is in the right and deserves the judge's actions. He refuses (v 4) but then finds himself concerned about being "beat down" (ESV) or "worn out" (NASB95) by her coming. The term "beat down" literally means "to give someone a black eye."³¹ It is a term that comes from boxing.³² That has led to some discussion among scholars about the possibility that the judge is afraid the woman might literally assault him. Is it possible she might punch him?³³ Of course, if she did assault the judge she would be in even more trouble and would never receive justice. Bock is correct.³⁴ Such is far outside the bounds of possibility. The trouble for the judge is that she is simply wearing him out. Finally, he relents and gives her what she asks for.

Jesus then makes the application. Once again it is a "how much more" parable. Jesus does not say "Just like the mean judge so my Father has to be begged and cajoled into helping His people." That is not His point at all. God gives freely and lavishly. He wants to help and save and deliver. "God doesn't give just to get rid of us; the Creator of the universes desires to be in relationship with the created."³⁵ What Jesus wants us to see is that if a crotchety judge will (eventually) do what is right how much more will God do for His children.

While that application from vv 7f is clear there remain several issues to be sorted out in these verses. First, what exactly is the "justice" that Jesus promises? That relates to what Jesus has been teaching about the coming of the Son of Man in chapter 17. Nolland steers the right course by saying "now we have the elect ones

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1449.

³² Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 1179.

³³ Metzger, "God as F(r)iend," 47.

³⁴ Bock, *Luke*, 1450.

³⁵ Sharron R. Blezard, "Pester, Pester, Pester": <http://www.stewardshipoflife.org/2013/10/pester-pester-pester/>.

to whom God is pledged, not an insignificant widow who is quite unknown to the judge. It is more than likely that an eschatological vindication is intended.³⁶ As this is Luke's only use of "elect" in his Gospel it bears noting that Old Testament roots of this term relate to the faithful remnant.³⁷ Jesus is telling His disciples not to give up in the face of adversity and trials (note the end of the parable in v 8). God will vindicate the faithful if they do not lose their faith.

But when will this great moment occur? Jesus says "God will not delay long over them" (v 7b). This phrase is much disputed. Bock surveys twelve different interpretations.³⁸ Hicks lists no less than seven different translations of it, ranging from "will He be tolerant to their opponents?" (Moffat) to "Will He keep putting them off?" (NIV).³⁹ The technical aspects of correctly translating the Greek terms here are well beyond the scope of this lecture⁴⁰ but it seems best to understand Jesus to say that God will not delay in bringing justice. The idea "though He *appears to delay over them*"⁴¹ well captures the sense. Jesus' disciples would feel as if God was doing nothing, that there was no justice coming, but Jesus is assuring them God sees, knows, and will vindicate them.

As if the reader has not waded through enough deep water the parable closes with Jesus saying something about when that vindication will come, but how to understand that is far from certain. The translations reflect this uncertainty, with some offering "quickly" (NASB95) while others say "speedily" (ESV, NKJV). Hicks even argues for "suddenly"⁴² but the evidence seems to tilt toward "soon," making either "speedily" or "quickly" in tune with what Jesus wanted to say. Fitzmyer's comment that God will not dilly-dally

³⁶ Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, 869.

³⁷ See Isaiah 65:9, 15, 22; also Sirach 35:14–22, while not inspired, is strikingly similar.

³⁸ Bock, *Luke*, 1451–53.

³⁹ John Mark Hicks, "The Parable of the Persistent Widow (Luke 18:1–8)," *ResQ* 33 (1991): 219.

⁴⁰ Freed notes the language and vocabulary are unusual. Edwin D. Freed, "The Parable of the Judge and the Widow," *NTS* 33 (1987): 54.

⁴¹ Hicks, "The Parable of the Persistent Widow," 219.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 220.

like the unjust judge fits well here.⁴³ There would be a delay in this vindication, and first-century saints were dealing with that reality. That delay in Jesus' return and confusion about it may well be the entire reason Luke included this parable. Jesus reassures His disciples that God is at work and will work for them, and sooner than many might think or expect. Indeed, Luke answers the question of "when" in Acts.⁴⁴

What Does The Unjust Judge Mean for Our Praying Today?

Any application to today's reader and his or her prayer life must begin by again stating that this is a "how much more" parable. If a dishonest and mean judge would yield to the persistent prayers of a helpless widow how much more will the holy and righteous God answer the prayers of His people? Once again Jesus makes the point that God wants to answer prayer.

That point is particularly sharpened in this parable where there is delay and answers do not come immediately. Certainly, some may see an application to praying for someone with a terminal medical diagnosis, dramatic job loss, or some other crisis of daily life, but Jesus' teaching here has to do with waiting for His return. During that time disciples may suffer, and they may wonder where God is and even if Jesus will be victorious. Jesus has just told His disciples that His Kingdom will come (17:20), He will win (17:24), and not to be disheartened by the cross (17:25). Noah had to wait (17:25) and so will disciples. Nevertheless, it will happen, and suddenly, like with Sodom and Gomorrah (17:28ff). During the delay disciples must keep their faith intact (18:1), keep praying for justice and the return of the Son of Man, because He is coming, and when He comes He will be looking to see if His disciples kept the faith (18:8). "Authentic Christian prayer persists, regardless of how deafening the silence, not in the insistent demand for any particular answer, but in the unswerving conviction that God's answers,

⁴³Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 1117.

⁴⁴Freed, "The Parable of the Judge and the Widow," 56.

whatever they may be, are only a matter of time.”⁴⁵ In a world increasingly hostile to faith and Christianity, where persecution’s storm clouds gather on the horizon, the message of this parable is perfectly relevant and must be sounded again.

Final Conclusions from these Parables

Prayer is complicated. It is a dazzling idea but it is not always easy to understand, to square with the circumstances we face, or even to do. That is why Jesus challenges His followers with these two parables. They are powerful and they are realistic. Once properly understood several implications for our praying today emerge.

First, although stated repeatedly throughout the preceding analysis, this is a place where every student of the text wants to write deeply in his or her mind “How much more.” These parables are the quintessential example of this motif. More importantly than simply observing the tactics of Jesus’ teaching, however, is the truth that without recognizing the “how much more” idea in these parables the disciple can be left with conclusions fully 180 degrees from what Jesus is teaching. God is not a crabby God who only reluctantly accedes to our needs. God is not an unjust judge who must be badgered into doing what is right. He is ready and willing and *wants* to answer prayer. That is what these parables bring to the hearer. They seek to give us every motivation to pray and to pray willingly and expectantly. If two miserable people can be bothered into doing what is right *how much more* will God, who is a loving Father, give His children what they need?

Secondly, many of us need to seriously modify what we say and think about persistence in prayer. Scripture includes some examples of persistence in prayer⁴⁶ but if we are guilty of teaching and believing that getting what we seek from God is a matter of continuing to pound on the door of heaven until it opens we have missed it badly. This turns prayer into “a cosmic balance, each prayer adding another pebble to the positive side of God’s equation. Only when enough requests, offered with sufficient passion,

⁴⁵ Crump, *Knocking on Heaven’s Door*, 63.

⁴⁶ Elijah in 1 Kings 18:44; Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:7f.

tilt the scale toward heaven's preferred option is salvation able to take its next step forward,"⁴⁷ and such thinking directly contradicts both parables.

Instead, we need to replace such views of God with a better, scriptural view: God as the generous giver. This is extraordinarily important because part of the challenge of prayer is discouragement. When prayer has been offered again and again (it is not wrong to persist in prayer), and for reasons beyond our comprehension God is not responding as we wish Jesus recognized that the chances are great one could "lose heart." Into that time of difficulty, both of these parables can ease the pain and uncertainty of unanswered prayer. They do that not by blaming the one praying or demanding that one pray even more persistently or (worst of all) insinuating that somehow one's faith is insufficient to get the answer desired. Instead, they reassure the heart that God wants to answer, and in His time, He will answer. That means that while the momentary circumstances driving fervent requests in prayer may not change, behind it all, our relationship with God is not to be questioned. The problem is not with the one praying, or with the God who hears those prayers. We may never understand why our prayer was not answered as we desired but we will never doubt that He is the good and kind and marvelous Father who is ready to give to His children as they "knock, seek and ask" (Luke 11:9). He is the Father who longs to come and vindicate his children (Luke 18:7f). God's ear is near and His hand is able. Bringing this message to one hurting, discouraged, and doubting can truly make all the difference.

Further, we need to be candid about how prayer offers a real challenge to our faith. When we do ask God again and again, and there seems to be no response, what happens next? Jesus warns His disciples that there will be such times. It will become easy to believe that God does not want to get up "out of bed" and be inconvenienced by us. It will become easy to think that God is not righteous and that He does not care for our suffering. The question then is about our faith. This is especially poignant in the Parable of the

⁴⁷ Crump, *Knocking on Heaven's Door*, 63.

Unjust Judge. Jesus told that parable not to urge us to simply keep praying but that we would keep praying and *not lose heart*. He concludes it by asking if when He returns will He find *faith*. Jesus wants to know if we will give up on prayer, and will we stop believing?

Finally, prayer is a major part of the disciple's daily life. The reason Jesus talks about it so much, teaches on it so much, and does it so much is to help us see that we ought "always to pray." As Warren Berkley writes "Prayer should not be like a fire extinguisher. This equipment hangs on the wall and you may pay little attention to it until there is an emergency ... Some treat prayer the same way. If there is no emergency in life, they don't use it. But in time of crisis they want God to listen and respond at once!"⁴⁸ Jesus is teaching us that prayer is not an "in case of fire" measure. It is part of what disciples do as they try to live through the often trying situations that arise in life. It is what disciples do as they seek to be like their Master. Prayer is not rubbing the genie's lamp to get wishes, and there are no blanket promises, no magic formulas, and no gimmicks that guarantee God will do our will. Instead, prayer is the opportunity for the creature to come before the Creator and humbly ask for what is needed, knowing that our great and loving Father wants to hear from His children and will, in His time, give them what is best.

⁴⁸ Warren Berkley, "Why Men 'Ought Always to Pray,'" *Expository Files* 7.5 (2000).

Be Merciful to Me, the Sinner: The Attribute of Humility

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican

Neil Tremblett

And He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and viewed others with contempt: Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' I tell you; this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted." And they were bringing their babies to Him so that He would touch them, but when the disciples saw it, they began rebuking them. But Jesus called for them, saying, "permit the children to come to Me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all." (Luke 18:9–17)¹

There are a few things in life that I have come to appreciate over the years of preaching. The first is prayer. Prayer can bring peace and calm your soul, share your joy with your God who gave it, and reveal who we truly are, if we have an honest heart. Prayer is important to this lecture. The second is forgiveness. Without forgive-

¹NKJV.

ness there would be little about which I could rejoice. The last is the great need to be humble. In Matthew 5:3, Jesus started with, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” I do not think it was a mistake or even a careless thought or space filler. Jesus was purposeful in starting the sermon on the mount the way He did. If one cannot empty oneself of all pride and be poor in spirit, there is no reason to go on to the next kingdom characteristics. If we will not stop and consider all that God has done for us, how He has forgiven us of all our sins, how in the world can we reach the kind of humility at which God wants us to arrive? You see, without emptying ourselves first of pride and selfish ambitions, we bind the hands of Jesus to work in our lives.

I love what David McClister said a few years back about the times in which Jesus lived;

“It was a fiercely competitive society obsessed with notions of power, honor and status. Getting these things, increasing in them, and displaying them before others was vitally important to them. The further up the social ladder one climbed, the greater his prestige and the more worthy of honor he became. Greatness was viewed as a matter of increase and gain, of upward movement in society. Goodness to others was simply a tool for the advancement of self. Once we see this about the Roman world, we are in a position truly to appreciate Philippians 2.”²

This was also the social context for this lecture as well. This mindset permeated the mind of God’s people, time and time again. If not careful, pride will grab our minds as well. Jesus gives the kingdom citizen a radical message: change your thinking. It is not about what you can grab on your own, but what you can lay down for Him and others.

Who Were the Pharisees And Sadducees?

In the OT the Jews had a physical kingdom for many years. The kingdom was then divided. After turning from God and hardening

²David McClister, “He Did Not Regard Equality with God a Thing to Be Grasped: The Humility of God,” in *Of First Importance: He Died and Was Buried: The Florida College Annual Lectures 2012*, ed. Daniel W. Petty (Temple Terrace: Florida College Press, 2012), 70.

their hearts against God, it was time for God to show His people righteousness yet again. God would first use the Assyrians to demonstrate He was not happy with them. After that, He used the Babylonians to finish what the Assyrians had already started. The kingdom was destroyed. The Persians come along and defeated the Babylonians and then they owned the Jewish people. The Persians allowed the Jewish people to go back and rebuild the wall and the temple but would not let the Jewish people have their own king. The Persians would allow them to rule themselves, to a certain degree, using their own religious laws. With this, they would need a new kind of leader to interpret the law for the people and show them how to enforce the law. This would be complicated because they would be using a religious law to socially govern the people. The Persian rule did not last long as Alexander the Great came and conquered the Persians, as well as Jerusalem. His rule was short and was passed down to Ptolemy, his general. He had the same view as Alexander the Great. The Greeks would have rule, and the conquered would live like the Greeks. Ptolemy wanted people to speak Greek and study philosophy. As you can imagine, this did not sit well with the Jews. The Jewish people longed to have their own kingdom again and living like Greeks did not get them any closer to this happening. After some time, Ptolemy lost his control of the people to the Seleucids. They were even more emphatic when it came to living like Greeks. They wanted to do away with the Jewish customs and replace them with the Greek way of life. When the Jews fought back, it was known as The Maccabean Rebellion. The Jews won and reestablished their own kingdom, and with that there was a need to make sense of the laws with which they were trying to govern their people.

This is where the Sadducees and Pharisees came into play: One group leaned more to the left and one more to the right. The Sadducees thought that, in order to be on the right side and protect what they had, they needed to be more like the other nations. The Pharisees felt differently when it came to other nations. The Pharisees believed conforming to be like other nations was why they as a people were always punished by God. Acting like other nations

was not the answer this time. They were conservative and rejected any law or way that was not first rooted in their Jewish laws. There was a real culture war going on. Some of the people were trying to get back to their true roots and others were pushing forward with the times. Both believed their way would make Israel great again.

The Sadducees come to be known as the group who did not believe in much of the supernatural teaching of the OT. They did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, miracles, angels or spirits. They wanted to be more “Greek” and less “Jewish.” They believed that religion could provide for some of the solutions needed for the people socially and could help morally, but religion was not meant to be transformative at all.

The Pharisees wanted the Jews to live more like Jews and less like other nations, to be conservative with their laws and way of life. They obsessed about laws, not just for themselves, but for everyone else as well, to the point that they used force when it came to making sure everyone would follow the laws. This, they believed, would make them great again.

How could these two groups of people come together when they took two very different stances on almost everything to do with the Jewish people and law? They fought about all this yet had to come together under the same roof and make up the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the governing council that ran from 23 members to around 71³ and was made up of religious and legal scholars who would get together and talk, argue, and make laws, many of which were binding on the people about what they should or should not do.

There were power shifts from time to time, but at the time of Jesus (mid to late 20’s AD) there was a Pharisee-dominated council with a strong influence for the Sadducees. The Pharisees rejected Jesus because He did not follow the rules nearly as much as they felt He needed to. They thought He did not understand what it was going to take to bring their nation back to its former glory and make things right again in the sight of God. The Sadducees re-

³Shira Schoenberg, “Ancient Jewish History: The Sanhedrin,” <https://www.jewish-virtuallibrary.org/the-sanhedrin>.

jected Jesus because they knew He believed in all the supernatural teaching of the OT, and He worked miracles, both of which went directly against their teachings; however, they put all this age-old hatred of right and left on hold for one reason: to kill Jesus.

Who Were the Publicans?

As you read the NT, you often see references to tax collectors, or publicans, in the ministry of Jesus. In our text for this lecture, what purpose did they serve? What was their job? How were they viewed? The tax burden in ancient Judea under Roman occupation was a religious tax which was paid to the Jewish rulers in order to maintain the temple. They also paid tax to the Romans for income and duties. This was done forcefully at times, if needed. There were fees to do business and tolls to use bridges or roads. When you add up these taxes, it is estimated they were 30–40% of what people earned. The tax burden was high and was, therefore, one of the reasons why tax collectors were viewed so poorly.⁴

When you also consider how the taxes were collected, it added to the unfavorable view. Most of the tax collectors were independent contractors. Most of them were Jews who worked for the Roman government. These independent contractors would pay the Roman government a franchise fee for the right to collect taxes for them. Anything they would collect above and beyond what the taxes were was kept by the contractor. Can you see the problem? Many of them charged much more than they should, lining their pockets with money from the ones who worked hard for their wages. They would assess the goods that were being sold at a far higher tax, making more for themselves. The one selling had no recourse or way to argue his case: he just had to pay. If one did not want to pay, he would be threatened with trumped up charges of smuggling and then have hush money extorted from him to keep the tax collector from going to the Roman government.

Tax collectors were despised by their fellow Jews for good reason. For one, they were an ever-present reminder of oppression,

⁴Norman Perrin and Dennis Duling, *The New Testament: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 4–35.

and they used cruel methods against their own countrymen to become wealthy. Also, their work required them to spend much time with Gentiles who were considered spiritually unclean. For these reasons, tax collectors were seen as the worst kind of sinners in the eyes of the Jews. Socially, they were rejected and shunned. Politically, they were seen as traitors. Religiously, they were counted as ones who had left God. It was the worst kind of black mark to be called, or associate with, a tax collector. They were not allowed to hold any kind of responsible public office, not allowed to give testimony in Jewish legal courts, and religious leaders debated whether a tax collector could experience real, sincere repentance.

Knowing all this about tax collectors, it is amazing that Jesus reached out to them and embraced them. He ate with tax collectors like we see in Luke 5:29–39, taught a chief tax collector in Luke 19:1–10, and He even chose a tax collector to be one of His twelve disciples in Matthew 9:9. It shows the true power of Jesus Christ when it comes to redemption. No class of people are beyond the message of the cross, from grace or mercy that our Lord offers to all. These are ones that began to follow Him; ones on whom we might turn our backs and refrain from sharing the saving message.

View of Self: Humility or Pride

Jesus' Pharisee and publican parable is taught right after the parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1–8). I believe it was done this way on purpose; they truly belong together. When we think about the persistent widow, the lesson is to pray and not lose heart, pray without giving up hope. When we consider the Pharisee and publican parable, the concern should be how we view ourselves before God when we do pray. How we view ourselves has direct bearing on whether God hears us or not. Will you choose to be filled with pride? Or be humbled under the mighty hand of God?

When I think about how we should view ourselves, the sermon on the mount comes to mind. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:3). In Jesus' discourse on what the kingdom citizen should look like, He starts with how we

view ourselves. To be a kingdom citizen one must reach the point to clearly see that he or she is spiritually bankrupt. For many of us, we never truly reach this point. The idea that we can approach God in prayer and hold on to our selfish pride is sinful.

In his commentary, *The Sermon on the Mount*, Emmett Fox gives us a practical way to look at “poor in spirit” and what it means:

To be poor in spirit means to have emptied yourself of all desire to exercise personal self-will, and, what is just as important, to have renounced all preconceived opinions in the wholehearted search for God. It means to be willing to set aside your present habits of thought, your present views and prejudices, your present way of life if necessary; to jettison, in fact, anything and everything that can stand in the way of your finding God.⁵

That thought goes along with Proverbs 27:2: “Let another man praise you, and not your own mouth; A stranger, and not your own lips.” This proverb works for all places in our life, but most of us feel there is no reward to live this way. Most of us would rather be in the limelight than quietly work behind the scenes. When we think of the attribute required for the kingdom citizen when it comes to humility, most of us turn the other way. I have come to see over the years that having this attribute of humility is a true mark of success. If we could be as concerned about humility as we are about being seen and recognized for our great achievements, you and I would be more in awe of our great Creator.

In Luke 16:19–31, the rich man is described as one who was not concerned about the spirit but only the flesh. This is proven when we see where he ends up after he dies. The rich man looked the part: “clothed in purple and fine linen,” and he lived the part: “fared sumptuously every day.” The rich man and Lazarus were both Jews, but only one of them viewed himself the way God saw him.

In Matthew 19:16–26, Jesus interacts with another rich man, telling him to leave all that he had gained and trust that the Lord would take care of him; however, he could not leave his pride behind. I think it is interesting that Jesus tells him to sell all and fol-

⁵ Emmet Fox, *The Sermon On The Mount: The Key to Success in Life* (New York: Harper One, 1970), 22

low Him. You see, one can leave his pride behind and follow Him or not. The choice is always ours.

As we consider the sermon on the mount again, we see that being spiritually bankrupt, seeing that we can do nothing on our own when it comes to being righteous before our God, allows our longing to be part of the kingdom to grow. If one does not start here with his view of self and how to gain righteousness, there is no point mourning over our sin, being meek, or hungering and thirsting for righteousness. I believe that is why Jesus said, “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matt 19:24). We must empty ourselves of all pride, once and for all, so we can be part of God’s kingdom.

In the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus’ response to a lawyer is powerful when connecting it with the text under review. “Then Jesus said, Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37). It is impossible to show mercy if we are hung up on self. Sometimes we cannot see outside ourselves to see someone else hurting or in need because we see only our needs or follow the way of sinful pride. Repeatedly, Jesus shot down the idea that we are better or more special than someone else just because of our own lofty view of ourselves.

The NT is not where God first condemned a high estimation of self. King Hezekiah is one who acted with a high estimation of himself: “but Hezekiah did not repay according to the favor shown him, for his heart was lifted up; therefore, wrath was looming over him and over Judah and Jerusalem” (2 Chr 32:25). His improper view of himself caused him to be unholy before God. It is interesting to me that the next verse shows that he saw the error of his way and sought to fix it. “Then Hezekiah humbled himself for the pride of his heart” (2 Chr 32:26). Unlike the Pharisee, Hezekiah put himself back in the right place when viewing himself.

I love Ezekiel 16:49f, as well, to further open our eyes to this great sin. As Ezekiel preaches about how far the people of Jerusalem have moved from following God, he uses Sodom as an example. “Look this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: She and her daughter had pride...neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy” (v 49). When we think about Sodom, we almost

always look to them when condemning homosexuality, and for good reason. What is interesting to me is pride, or high view of self, led to the demise of that great city. I think it is also noteworthy that being full of self also leads to mistreatment of those who are poor and needy. We see this attribute in the Pharisee, do we not? “And they were haughty and committed abomination before Me” (v 50). This haughty spirit was within the Pharisee as well. He did not leave righteous after he prayed but rather fell short of what God expects.

Almost every OT and NT example that we read about where a high estimation of self is mentioned or implied, we find mistreatment of others. We find that with the Pharisee and the tax collector and every other person outside of the holy pages of the Bible. You see, what is the point of all this study if we do not put ourselves into the application of the accounts, events, parables and examples that we find in the Bible?

The Attribute of Humility

So, how does the attribute of humility fit in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector? I want to look at the differences in their prayers first, in hopes that we can learn a little more about what to do and not do when we pray with all our heart to the God of mercy and pardon.

Even before the parable starts, we see Jesus knowing the heart of His listeners. “Also, He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others.” (Luke 18:9). What Jesus could be getting at here is, I know you feel you do not need Me, and that is because you are so full of yourself. This is not the first or the last time Jesus interacted with the Pharisees. Jesus knew them inside and out.

The Pharisee, following the law, would have gone every day to the temple to pray. Every day he would climb the steps of the temple, enter, and pray. The Pharisee would make sure everyone saw and knew he was there. Praying every day to the Lord on high is a great habit to get in, but He wants it to be more than just routine for us. Another observation of the Pharisee’s prayer is he talks

with himself and not God. “He stood and prayed thus with himself” (Luke 18:11). We get the impression he is content with hearing himself talk instead of communing with the God of heaven. The feeling of pride is seen easily when you start to read this parable, and the lesson would have been clear to His hearers, no matter how full of themselves they were. “God, I thank you I am not like other men.” Already he is starting to justify himself by using others as a standard of righteousness, picking those who live a different life than him. I think it is interesting that he picks one who, in his eyes, is weaker than him. We do this all the time, do we not? The temptation for us when doing the litmus test of righteousness is always others who are weaker, never ones that are stronger. Even if we do look at the stronger in faith, we are still missing a true evaluation of where we are with God. The Pharisee thanks God he is not like other sinners, and lists three groups of sinners: 1) An extortioner is a criminal who extorts money from someone by threatening to expose embarrassing information about them, someone who “uses one’s official position or powers to obtain property, funds, or patronage”⁶; 2) What and who are the unjust? An unjust boss might fire you the first time you are late for work. You might think of the word justice in order to remember the meaning of the word just, which means “fairness.”⁷ The tax collectors were unfair and unrighteous when dealing with their own people for the sake of the Romans. 3) The meaning of the word adulterer is: “Figuratively, faithless towards God, ungodly: James 4:4.”⁸ While it is possible that the Pharisee was meaning a sexual sin when he used the word “adulterer,” I believe the figurative view fits best here as it teaches about leaving our relationship with God behind so we can deal with others as we please. That is how the Pharisee viewed the tax collector; he had left God and did not belong in the temple praying, making the Pharisee the judge of who belonged in the temple and who did not.

⁶ *American Heritage Dictionary Of The English Language*, 5th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, 2016): <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/extortioner>.

⁷ Eugene Ehrlich, ed., *Oxford American Dictionary* (New York: Avon Books, 1980), 361.

⁸ Joseph Henry Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), 417.

The text links the tax collector with all three of these words and definitions, showing us how the Pharisee felt about the tax collector and why he did not belong in the temple. The tax collector was a sinner; there is no question about it, and the Pharisee made sure the tax collector felt like one. The Pharisee had placed himself in a seat that does not belong to him but belongs to the Lord. His pride is on full display as the Pharisee tells about his own life now:

“I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess” (Luke 18:12). “Look at me! Look at me! Hear what I do!” was the cry of the Pharisee here. He wanted to show everyone that he went above and beyond what was commanded by God Himself: “I am twice as righteous as God asks me to be so I do not need to pray to God about this, and I can judge you.” This is the feeling I get as I read this text. The pride that comes from within and hits his lips is truly shocking here. He has condemned himself of being unholy and leaving his relationship with God behind. The Pharisee is trying to prove his righteousness by actions with no concern about his heart, this will not work. We see here that to act as the Pharisee is to act with empty religion before God.

As Jesus continues to speak, He turns His focus back to the tax collector. He is alone, feeling the weight of his unholy lifestyle and is very much in sin. He has had some spiritual clarity to be in the temple here at this time, with a great longing to get things right with God. He is where he needs to be at the right time. The text also reveals to us that he is broken by his claim and action by “beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’” (Luke 18:13). Not only is He broken (seeing where he is with his relationship with God) but takes action to fix it with God. He approaches God very differently than the Pharisee. The tax collector stands afar off, does not look to heaven, beats his breast and sees his helpless, sinful condition and longs to be reconciled with God.

So many of us are like the Pharisee. We see clearly other people’s faults and sins but fail to see our own. I like what Gerry Sandusky says: “We see others, big nasty warts on their face, but fail to see the warts on our own face.” We are ready and willing to jump to rub a sin in others faces but overlook doing the same to our own.

The tax collector was going to find no mercy from the Pharisee but found more than enough with Jesus.

Jesus continues to tell those present the shocking news that the tax collector was justified and not the Pharisee. Put yourself in the shoes of those listening, they knew who and what the tax collector stood for. The shock they must have felt as He said those words must have hit them like a two-by-four on the head. Really? There was no way this could be true. When we live messed up lives, we have messed up conclusions about righteousness and who can be holy.

Jesus, in these verses as well, teaches them that if they continue to exalt themselves, He will bring them low. There are so many OT and NT examples that teach this thought directly or indirectly. Think for just a minute about how that tax collector would have felt leaving that temple, his life now back in line with God. The joy would have been overwhelming, and the peace he would have felt would be unlike anything he felt up to that point in his life. On the other hand, the Pharisee left as he came: full of pride, unholy, judgmental, lost in himself, and lost from his relationship he had with God. Pride is at the root of all sin. Pride has caused many church troubles, the downfall of many elderships and the death of many saints spiritually. Fight, brothers and sisters, like you have never fought before when it comes to this great cancer of the soul.

Right after this in vv 15–17, we have the interaction of Jesus and little children, and I believe for good reason. If there is one thing that has become crystal clear to me in raising five children, it is how much they rely on me as a father. “Dad, can you fix this? Dad, how do you do that? Dad, I can’t do it. Can you help?” You see Jesus speaking to men here and bringing it back home perfectly, as He always does, and making His hearers look at themselves. Children want to learn and ask many questions, and somewhere along the line pride comes in and ruins it all. “That’s mine. Don’t touch my toy. I want that! I’ll do it my way!” All too soon become the words of little ones we love so much. I have watched my kids time and time again fight, both with words and physical blows, and a few minutes later snuggled up beside each other holding hands, watching

a movie or playing with each other. I have heard a lot of lessons about becoming like little children and how it is essential for us to become like them, but none have taught me better than watching children in action. Jesus made them see that firsthand. Just as children rely on and submit to their parents, we need to see our need for and show obedience to our heavenly Father. We need to put our selfish will aside and humbly submit to God's will.

So, What Do We Learn from Luke 18:9–17?

One of the great lessons to take away from this lecture is: Compare yourself to God's word and Jesus—not to another person here on earth. This can be so hard for us at times when we just want to feel good and feel a little bit of pride. If there is a point to be made about pride it is this: The smallest bit of pride in self will cost us heaven. To be part of God's wonderful kingdom, we must be radically different from everyone else when it comes to emptying ourselves of all pride. If you are full of pride you will want others to serve you, if you excel in the attribute of humility you will seek out others to serve.

I love the example of Jesus in John 13:1–21 when He teaches about humility and service. One of the most powerful lessons we can teach is the one which is not only heard but seen: Jesus told and showed what the kingdom citizen would look like. To think, Jesus, the one who created all (John 1:1f), the one who holds all together (Col 1:17), is washing the feet of mankind whom He created. If this is not a radical attribute of humility, I am not sure where else to look. The inability to look outside of self is killing us as Christians and is a great plague to local churches around the world. You see, Jesus is not teaching a lesson on washing feet here but washing our hearts from all pride and getting busy serving others. I like what Jesus says in v 17: You are not blessed until "you do them." We can say all day and night we are a Christian, we have emptied ourselves of pride, but our actions tell on us every time. The attribute of humility that Jesus is after in us is one that sees himself as nothing more than a servant of the great King:

Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many. (Matt 20:26–28)

It is always better for us to humble ourselves than to have someone else do it for us. The Bible is full of accounts of people unwilling to humble themselves, and God used amazing ways to bring someone or whole nations to their knees. I love the lesson Jesus taught here: If you want to be a success in My eyes here, get on your knees, humble yourself so I do not have to.

In the Gospels, Jesus says several times, “whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Matt 23:12; Luke 14:11; Luke 18:14). My point with this is, to be of value in the kingdom we must be the ones to humble ourselves. If someone else must humble us there is no lifting up of any kind. When someone is humbling us, it is not true humility but rather humiliation.

Jesus demonstrates the attribute of humility perfectly. He humbled Himself and was obedient, and God exalted Him.

“Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Phil 2:3–11)

“For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written: “As I live, says the Lord, Every knee shall bow to Me, And every tongue shall confess to God.” (Rom 14:10b-11)

One of the greatest points we can grasp from the Romans 14 text is, if Jesus must humble us in judgment, we will not be exalted. We will not be great in the kingdom. We will not even be in the kingdom but will suffer in eternity.

Another lesson I learned in putting this together in greater depth was we need to aid others in getting their lives right, if they so desire. I see it time and time again in local churches, unless someone looks like they have their life together, we walk the other way. I cannot tell you how many times I have been told by Christians, "Do not waste your time with them; their lives are all messed up!" One's life might be messed up, but maybe not nearly as bad as the one saying those words. Remember who went down from the temple righteous and who did not.

I am reminded of in the text in Luke that God is willing to help, give peace, or save all who will come to Him. For someone like me, who has lived an unrighteous life at times, He gives me hope. I was once told by a very good friend and brother of mine, John Hains, "a life lived without hope is truly a sad and miserable existence." You see, pride robs us of all hope because it robs us of Jesus. To think that so many on this side of eternity will chose pride, which is sin, and turn their backs on Jesus, who longs to save us, is almost too much to bear.

The next time someone comes forward in a service or makes a late night call to you wanting to get their life right with the God of heaven and earth, stop the judging and prejudging and give them your time and the gospel, both in word and deed. I am fearful that, if we in local churches do not get this lesson down fast, we are going to see fewer and fewer conversions to Christ.

The last observation I would like to make is our religion can be empty and void of God. Almost everyone who takes time to read this book understands and desires the opposite. No one taking the time to read page after page, manuscript after manuscript, would do so expecting nothing to be gained. Take that same effort and idea to your worship you offer to God. Spend as much time as you can worshipping your God both publicly and privately, with a deep desire to understand just a little more about your God,

so your time will not be wasted. There is much disappointment knowing all the time you spent on something was time wasted; I know we can all see that clearly. Do not let that be time in worship with the Creator of all things.

How Are Humility and Forgiveness Connected?

The easy answer is it is impossible to practice Bible forgiveness if you are not first filled with humility. I believe that is why this lesson is given before the next. Beloved, we must get this here and now. Without forgiving others, we will not be forgiven. Listen to what Jesus said: “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt 6:14f). “So, My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses” (Matt 18:35). Beloved, we are told our forgiveness is contingent on our forgiving others. It is more than just words. It involves the heart. If our heart has any pride in it, forgiveness will never come from there and will cause us to miss heaven. I heard Dee Bowman say many times, “If you have missed heaven, you have just missed all there is.” Please grow in the attribute of humility, for such is the kingdom of heaven.

Should You Not Have Had Mercy? The Attribute of Forgiveness

The Parables of the Unmerciful Servant and the Two Debtors

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My colleague David Holder often says, “People love a good story.” Part of what makes Jesus intriguing to so many are His compelling stories. This is especially true of His stories of forgiveness, grace, and reconciliation. In his thoroughly detailed work *Stories with Intent*, Klyne Snodgrass begins with the Unmerciful Servant and the Two Debtors under the heading “Grace and Responsibility.” He describes them as “the most revealing and compelling of all Jesus’ parables. They reveal both the nature of parables and the essence of Jesus’ kingdom message.”¹ This lecture will focus on the first of the two parables. The nature of parables and how to read them is well covered by others. For our purposes we will start with one key principle of parable study, and all Bible study: observing the context in which the parable is set.

The Context of Matthew 18

Matthew 18 is often described as Jesus’ “discourse on the church.” It is one of the rare instances where Jesus uses the word

¹Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 61. This encyclopedic work has been a constant companion in my effort to effectively teach God’s Word. It was recommended to me by the late Martin Pickup who I wish to recognize for his influence on me as a student of scripture.

ekklesia. Better titles are recommended by France, “The Discourse on Relationships”² or Hagner, “Life in the Community of the Kingdom.”³ While some scholars see a connection back to 17:22,⁴ most commentaries divide the chapter into two sections at v 21. A question is asked of Jesus in v 1 and v 21. The first question in v 1 sets the tone for the whole chapter. The disciples ask, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”⁵ Jesus’ answer points to the need for humility⁶ and concern for others.⁷ There should be concern about our own sins, not to cause others to sin, and about sheep who have gone astray.⁸ Every person matters, “there are no ‘great ones’ in the Kingdom of heaven.”⁹ If our Father does not want any to perish, neither should we (Matt 18:14).

Next, we come to perhaps the most well-known, yet in some places, too rarely practiced section of Matthew 18. Jesus commands a three-step approach for dealing with a brother who sins against us and does not repent. This is the critical context of the

² R. T. France, *Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 672.

³ Donald Hagner, *Matthew*, WBC 33B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 514.

⁴ David McClister, “Where Two or Three Are Gathered Together’: Literary Structure As a Key to Meaning in Matt 17:22–20:19,” *JETS* 39 (1996): 549–60. Matthew connects chapter 18 to the discussion in the previous chapter in several different ways. Most clearly, notice the introductory “At that time.”

⁵ All Bible quotations are from the *NASB 1995 Updated Edition* unless otherwise noted.

⁶ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia 2 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2007), 478. “Lowliness requires a change of one’s orientation; the renunciation of power, rank, wealth, and self-promotion; the recognition of one’s own fallibility and lack of security; taking seriously the other members of the family and always reaching out to them; and direct communication.”

⁷ “Concern for others” is Matthew’s connection between chapters 17 and 18. The whole question of the temple tax and kings collecting from their sons connects with our current subject and parable. For an excellent discussion of that scene see Robert Ogden “The Sons Are Free: Adoption for the Disciple,” in *The Works No One Else Did* Florida College Annual Lectures 2019, ed. David McClister (Temple Terrace: Florida College Press, 2019), 139–55.

⁸ Jesus’ reference to the “little ones” pointed to a child’s dependency. “The humility of a child consists of the inability to advance his or her own cause apart from the help and resources of a parent.” Michael J. Wilkens, *Matthew*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 613.

⁹ France, *Matthew*, 674. Or as Chumbley poetically puts it, “Christ had spoken of crosses, but the Twelve still dreamed of thrones.” Kenneth Chumbley, *Matthew*, 1st ed. (Nashville, TN: 1999), 321.

parable under consideration. This parable must be remembered when we are faced with the difficult circumstances that accompany “church discipline.” Matthew puts the process and the parable together to deter abusive approaches where someone may stress discipline without forgiveness.

Jesus’ followers cannot tolerate sin without confrontation. Equally important, they will display His love and eagerness to forgive. As many know well, Jesus said the second greatest command was Leviticus 19:18, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Notice the immediate context there. Leviticus 19:17 commands, “reason frankly with your neighbor” and v 18a warns not to, “bear a grudge against your people.”

So, the stage is set. We must confront those who have sinned against us, which prompts Peter’s famous question in v 21. “How many times? Up to seven times?”¹⁰ This is the setting of the Unmerciful Servant. Jesus’ parable is the fitting conclusion to the entire discourse of Matthew 18, which develops the theme of humility into its most practical and fullest demonstration: forgiving others.

It is worth pausing here before reading the parable to make an observation about Jesus’ teaching on the church. John’s gospel records Jesus telling His apostles that there was more He wanted to teach them, but there would not be time (John 16:12). One might argue that Jesus wanted to address more specifics such as church organization but that would be sheer speculation. However, the topics of Matthew’s chapter are quite clear: humility, accountability, correction, and forgiveness. Jesus addresses worship and doctrine elsewhere, but He did not emphasize the various specifics that some groups have stressed throughout history. This misplaced emphasis is worsened when groups neglect the specific subjects Jesus did mention in this critical moment. Christ’s church is people who are humble, seek accountability, offer correction, demonstrate love, and freely and frequently forgive.

¹⁰ See the technical commentaries about discussion over how to translate Jesus’ answer, “seventy times seven.” Debate over the numbers 77 or 490 date back to the early church. Of course, Jesus’ answer was not intended to be either literal number. The parable under consideration illustrates the idea is, forgive abundantly.

The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

This parable consists of three scenes and three characters. It is simple enough that certain alternative approaches are rarely considered.¹¹ The king, surprisingly, chooses unimaginable generosity by forgiving a debt his servant could never repay. Sadly, the much-forgiven slave physically attacks and refuses to forgive a relatively¹² small amount owed to him by another slave. On top of that, the slaves used nearly the exact same words in their appeals. Bystanders observe his actions and tell the king what happened. The king, originally moved with compassion, is now moved with anger. He hands the slave over to torturers and declares that mercy should have been extended rather than demanding repayment.¹³ This concluding subject of judgment is clearly present in many of Jesus' parables and will be covered by other lectures in this collection.

The parable involves a large amount of money. A "talent" was a measurement of weight, anywhere from 60–90 pounds.¹⁴ Therefore, the amount of worth would vary based upon which metal was being weighed. Efforts to accurately estimate current value are seriously flawed.¹⁵ A better comparison is to point out that Josephus said Herod the Great's annual salary was 900 talents.¹⁶ The real point of the amount is this: "What God has forgiven his people is beyond human calculations."¹⁷ Jesus was most likely using hyper-

¹¹ There are several intriguing questions that can be explored further. For example, Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent*, 68–69, discusses and rejects the view that sees the two indebted slaves as representing a Jew and a Gentile.

¹² I am indebted to Reagan McClenny for this wording. Comparatively this debt was tiny, it was something that could be paid back. However, it was large enough that it was not easily forgiven and forgotten. This observation has great practical importance when discussing our difficulty and ability to forgive others.

¹³ Suggestion of some commentators that Matthew added vv 34f to Jesus' original parable is unfounded. Luz remarks, "In my judgment we have here a classic example of how theological premises influence tradition-historical reconstruction. There is a clear attempt to distance Jesus from the idea of judgment." Yet, Luz later suggests a few areas of redaction from Matthew, assuming that Matthew is telling the same story from Luke or another source. Luz, *Matthew*, 469–70.

¹⁴ France, *Matthew*, 706.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 707, fn24.

¹⁶ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 66.

¹⁷ France, *Matthew*, 706.

bole as He often did in His parables.¹⁸ The second slave's debt is a fraction of the amount owed by the first.

The parable depicts slaves in a way that was normal in the time of Jesus. Some find it too far beyond reality that a slave could be responsible for so much debt. Yet, even if the amount was not real, in Jesus' parables slaves often managed large assets.¹⁹ People were sold into slavery for debts in the Old Testament (2 Kng 4:1; Neh 5:5; Isa 50:1; Amos 2:6). Slaves could also be sold to pay off the debts they owed their masters. The price of a slave had a broad range, from 500 to 2,000 denarii.²⁰

Many of Jesus' parables include unexpected twists for His audience. This one has a few potential surprises, some of which have already been mentioned. It is commonly pointed out, due to rabbinic teaching, that Peter's offer to forgive "seven times" is more than the audience would have expected.²¹ It often goes unmentioned that the parable actually illustrates the problem Peter and others fear: people do take advantage of the forgiveness offered to them. The amount depicted as being forgiven by God fits with depictions of God's incredible forgiveness in the Old Testament. Forgiveness is more common in The Law and the Prophets than is often assumed, and having a forgiving attitude has always been expected of God's people.²²

Since we know how the story ends, we may miss the surprise experienced by the original audience.²³ The first slave asks for pa-

¹⁸ Hagner, *Matthew*, 538. Parables, "by their nature often employ hyperbole for effect, and there is no reason to require that every point correspond to historical reality."

¹⁹ Jennifer A. Glancy, "Slaves and Slavery in the Matthean Parables," *JBL* 119 (2000): 67–90.

²⁰ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 66.

²¹ See for example, France, *Matthew*, 700. "If a debate recorded in *b. Yoma* 86b-87a may be taken to represent earlier rabbinic teaching, a limit of three times was regarded as sufficient."

²² Contrary to Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 72, and endnote 62 who says "...forgiving others is not emphasized in the Old Testament..." Forgiveness is seen in God's self-revelation to Moses as "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin..." (Exod 34:6–7; Num 14:18; Deut 4:31, 5:9f; Psa 86:15, 103:8–12, 130:3f; Joel 2:13). Being forgiving is expected in the Jubilee year command to forgive debts to one another (Lev 25:10–55). The need for a forgiving spirit is implied in the story of Jonah (4:2) and found explicitly in Micah 6:8.

²³ For a creative modern equivalent of this parable see Craig Blomberg, *Preaching*

tience from the king, implying the need for more time to figure out a way to pay. The king had other options available to him other than the one he chose. He “doesn’t restructure the debt, put the servant on a payment plan or give him a chance to raise the money. Instead, he does exceedingly abundantly above all the servant asked or hoped by forgiving the debt.”²⁴

Why did the king do this? The parable’s explanation offers a phrase that could well summarize the life of Jesus: “The lord of that slave felt compassion and released him” (Matt 18:27). When Matthew speaks of “compassion” in his account, it is almost always connected with Jesus.²⁵ “Compassion” is also found in the central parables of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:33 and the Prodigal Sons in 15:20. Compassion is defined as “sorrow for the sufferings or trouble of another or others, accompanied by an urge to help.”²⁶ It may be stretching the details of the parable, but notice the lord’s interaction with the first slave. He did not call him “wicked” when he owed a great amount. He was called “wicked” when he lacked compassion and refused to forgive (Matt 18:32).²⁷

This parable raises difficult questions. Can God’s forgiveness be withdrawn? The king is incredibly gracious when he forgives the debt, but his action seems to be the absolute opposite when he sends the offending servant to the torturers. Jesus equates the king with His heavenly Father. What does this teach us about God? Commentators since the Middle Ages have been frustrated with this question.²⁸ It seems to work against Jesus’ teaching of limitless forgiveness in 18:21f. It is this debate Snodgrass uses to illustrate one of the many ways parable interpretations can go wrong. Parables “must be allowed to do what they intend and not be pushed beyond their purposes.”²⁹ While this may not be the primary issue

the Parables (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 70.

²⁴ Chumbley, *Matthew*, 333.

²⁵ See Matthew 9:13, 36, 12:7, 14:14, 15:23, 20:34.

²⁶ “Compassion,” *Webster’s New World Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), 289.

²⁷ Chumbley, *Matthew*, 335.

²⁸ Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, 476–77.

²⁹ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 74–75.

Jesus' parable addresses, I will concede it is a worthwhile and important secondary issue. God can withdraw His forgiveness if we are not willing to forgive.

Another concern of some commentators is whether the parable teaches salvation by works. The response of Snodgrass is wonderful, "The fear of works righteousness is far too exaggerated. Would that there were an equal fear of being found inactive. Works righteousness is not the problem of most modern Christians. We would do better to realize if we do not work, we are not righteous."³⁰ While it may seem controversial to some Bible teachers today, there is a long history of Bible interpreters who recognize God's judgment will consider our deeds and behavior.³¹ Jesus is direct in His teaching on prayer and forgiveness: "If you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions" (Matt 6:15).

Upon deeper reflection, students will realize the principle in this parable is not radical. Disciples are to treat others the way God has treated them. We know well Peter's use of Leviticus, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." We must also come to know that we should be forgiving as He is forgiving. In Jesus' Beatitudes, He states "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."³² God's people must be merciful and forgiving. The idea is also found in William Ogden's hymn, *Seeking The Lost*. The third stanza exhorts, "Thus I would go on missions of mercy. . . cheering the faint and raising the fallen."³³

Forgiveness in the New Testament

The theme of forgiveness is obviously important in the New Testament. It occurs twice in Matthew's account of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. One more for good measure comes from the words He gives for prayer: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, 476–77. Luz includes interesting quotes from well-known writers such as Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin. Most importantly scripture makes this clear. *E.g.* Romans 2:5–8.

³² Also consider James 2:13, "For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy."

³³ William Ogden, "Seeking The Lost" (1886).

our debtors” (Matt 16:12). “Forgiveness not shown is forgiveness not known. . . . The forgiveness of God must be replicated in the lives of the forgiven.”³⁴

Paul repeatedly commands forgiveness as well. In Ephesians 4:31f, we read “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” Colossians 3:12 describes it as “bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.”

Luke 17 includes a story similar to the discussion of Matthew 18. Jesus is clear, “If he repents, forgive him” (Luke 17:3). He does not give a list of things the person must do to show their repentance is genuine. The other parable of Jesus referred to earlier is recorded in Luke 7:36–50, the Two Debtors. In this part of Luke’s account, he is documenting stories of Jesus meeting people who make great demonstrations of faith. Simon the Pharisee invites Jesus for a meal and is surprised at Jesus’ behavior. Simon says to himself, “If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner” (Luke 7:39). That scene leads Jesus to tell the parable of two debtors graciously forgiven of 500 and 50 denarii respectively. Jesus teaches by asking the question, “Which of them will love more?”³⁵ We know the answer as well as Simon did: “the one whom he forgave more.”

Jesus instructs Simon, and all who hear the story, to change the way we see people.³⁶ The woman was not just a sinner, she was forgiven. That forgiveness motivated her lavish demonstrations of

³⁴ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 74–75.

³⁵ As Earnhart puts it, “Then he draws His gracious noose more tightly as He explains the reason for her lavish, loving behavior.” Paul Earnhart, *Glimpses of Eternity: Studies in the Parables of Jesus* (Chillicothe: DeWard Publishing, 2012), 91.

³⁶ Several point out Jesus’ phrase “see this woman” as a launching point for practical applications. How we see others can take us into sinful judgment of others. Often that sin goes hand in hand with withholding forgiveness. “He drew a quick conclusion that was as untrue as it was ‘logical,’ and in his haste was grievously unfair to both the woman and Jesus.” *Ibid.*, 88.

love for Jesus. Luke graciously leaves the story open-ended regarding Simon just as he does in several portraits of the Pharisees.³⁷ The challenge for Simon, and for us, is to recognize that our debt to God is not as small as we may subconsciously imagine. We can wrongly look at others as greater sinners than ourselves. Focusing on their great sins can blind us from seeing our own great sins, graciously forgiven by the Father. So, while in one sense there are no “great ones” in the kingdom, in another sense, we are all great sinners.³⁸

The motivation for these commands on forgiveness often goes back to the character of God and the way He forgives. One of the most moving scenes in the book of Numbers is Moses’ prayer for Israel. God has said He will destroy Israel and start all over by making a nation out of Moses. Moses then prays, “. . . let the power of the Lord be great, just as You have declared.” When we think about the power of the Lord, many think about His great destructive power: the plagues against Egypt, the parting of the seas and crashing the waters down upon the enemy. Yet, Moses describes God’s power with the great declaration of God’s character. “The Lord is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression. . .” (Num 14:17f). Moses says that God is powerful because He does forgive.

We see this characteristic of God at the cross when His Son Jesus cries out, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:24). In Acts 7:60, Stephen demonstrates this same forgiving spirit as he is stoned to death. Jesus and Stephen do not wait for obvious signs of repentance. Stephen lived out Jesus’ saying in Mark 11:25, “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgression.”

³⁷ Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent*, 90. Consider also the most incredibly kind open-ended conclusion of the older son in The Prodigal Sons (Luke 15:11–32). Earnhart notes the possibility the parable was one more “reason to reject Jesus. A man who claims to forgive sin... who can believe a word he says.” Earnhart, *Glimpses of Eternity*, 92.

³⁸ Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent*, 91. Put another way, “None of us actually fits in a ‘lesser debtor’ category. This means that disdain for others and attitudes of superiority have no place with Christians.”

Therefore, what does it mean to forgive as the Father forgives? I understand why some insist on waiting for repentance and believe there are dangers with just “letting things go.”³⁹ However, if someone has sinned against us, we are not told to wait for them to come to us. Instead, Matthew 18 instructs us to go to them. Remember the king in the parable who represented God’s loving offer of forgiveness. Matthew 18:23 says that he “wished to settle accounts with his slaves.” As we strive to imitate God’s forgiveness we should think of Psalm 86:5, “For You, Lord, are good, and *ready to forgive*, and abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon You.” May God help us to live in such a way that people are not afraid to ask us for forgiveness⁴⁰ because they know we are ready to give them what God has abundantly given us.

Why Is Forgiveness So Hard?

Despite all the clear teaching on the need to be forgiving, many find it difficult.⁴¹ It may be Jesus stressed forgiveness the way He did because He knew we would tend to withhold it. It may simply be that forgiveness is hard. We may ask a different question than Peter’s: not a question about quantity or how often,⁴² but a question

³⁹For an interesting academic debate on this subject consult, Troy Martin, “The Christian’s Obligation Not to Forgive” *ExpT* 108 (1997): 360–62. Then the response from Elizabeth A. Gassin, “Are Christians Obligated Not to Forgive? A Response to Martin” *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 28 (2000): 36–42.

⁴⁰This is especially important in the realm of parenting. Children need to know as they grow older and before they move away that they will be always be welcomed home and embraced in the loving way of the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15.

⁴¹Grant Osborne, *Matthew*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 698. “It must be admitted that forgiveness is not an easy thing to do, especially when one has undergone serious wrongs like physical or sexual abuse. Christ is not saying that forgiveness must be instantaneous. It is a process often demanding a great deal of time and counseling. Still, mercy and forgiveness should at all times be the goal for which we strive. Moreover, this is a community and not just an individual responsibility; reconciliation must be the goal of all, and when we are deeply hurt, we need the counsel and help of our brothers and sisters in the church family.”

⁴²Blomberg points out that the definition of repentance and the context rejects any idea of unending forgiveness for someone who repeatedly is committing the same sin against us. “It is both invalid and very damaging to apply biblical calls for forgiveness to situations of chronic abuse, in which repeated patterns of destructive behavior continue without any change, no matter how sorry a person claims to feel.” Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables*, 75.

of quality. What if someone is challenged to forgive one who tried to kill or rape them? How is one who has been sexually abused as a child to forgive? Those extreme cases make forgiveness seemingly impossible. However, we have seen some withhold it over sins of a much smaller degree. Why are those also hard to forgive? We cannot know the mind of man as completely as we would like, but some have given helpful answers to consider.

In Everett Worthington's article "Forgiveness," he stresses the need for three traits. ". . . Empathy for the person who harmed them, humility about their own sinfulness, and gratitude over having themselves been forgiven by God and by others."⁴³ The first fundamental answer to why some people struggle to forgive is they lack one or more of these three traits. We do not want to understand what the transgressor may have been thinking. We will not try to see why things turned out the way they did. Lacking humility, we refuse to consider whether any blame falls on us; we think we handled everything perfectly. We need more empathy and humility. These two parables can serve as a cure to those of us who lack appropriate gratitude for what God has done for us.

Bradley Hambrick ingeniously uses a math⁴⁴ analogy to demonstrate why we resist forgiveness.

"The difficulty is wanting to forgive when forgiveness is (or at least is perceived to be) a bad relational investment. When (a) there is no substantive relationship with the offender, (b) the offense is greater than the relationship, or (c) the accumulation of offenses is greater than the relationship, then the "want to" gets challenged in this mathematical/investment approach to forgiveness. This is what we mean most often when we say, "You do not deserve to be forgiven." No one deserves to be forgiven; 'deserve' & 'forgive' are mutually exclusive. What we mean is, 'Forgiving you would be a bad relational investment for me.'"⁴⁵

⁴³ Everett Worthington, "Forgiveness," in *The Soul Care Bible*, ed. Tim Clinton (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 1520.

⁴⁴ Peter's answer "is statistical, not spiritual." Earnhart, *Glimpses of Eternity*, 82.

⁴⁵ Counselor Hambrick's article (<http://bradhambrick.com/lewisongforgiveness-3/>) is based on an analogy regarding math and forgiveness from C. S. Lewis. "...there are two things we can do to make [forgiveness] easier. When you start mathematics you do not begin with the calculus; you begin with simple addition. In the same way, if we really

In Paul Earnhart's discussion of these parables he rightly connects the failure to forgive to the self-seeking question that began Matthew 18, "Who is greatest?"⁴⁶ He contemplates why the servant hesitated to forgive.

"Was he congratulating himself on how clever he had been to escape certain disaster? Did he think the king a fool for falling for his line and vow that he would never be caught in such sentimental nonsense? Or is it conceivable that he was so dull as to see no connection between his own situation and that of his fellow? Jesus does not say."⁴⁷

Other reasons for denying forgiveness are possible, but more cynical. It could be paranoia as stated earlier in Hambrick. We fear what others will think of us. We fear how the person may take advantage of our generosity. Remember that acting out of fear often directs away from what God desires and into easier, yet sinful, paths. Another explanation could be power. We can wrongly enjoy having someone groveling at our feet for mercy. To free them from their guilt would leave us without anything to hang over their head. "Too many of us want to live with God under grace, but with men, under law. With our Father we want mercy, but with others we want justice."⁴⁸

It may simply boil down to lacking what the king had in Matthew 18:27: feeling compassion. The world, and sadly the church, has people who are not concerned with the sufferings of others. Those who have sinned against us suffer the feelings of guilt and remorse. If we are too self-centered, we care more about our pain than releasing the other person of theirs. "The key to forgiveness is to stop focusing on what others have done to us and focus instead on what Jesus has done for us."⁴⁹ Ultimately, giving forgive-

want (but all depends on really wanting) to learn how to forgive, perhaps we had better start with something easier than the Gestapo." C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 116.

⁴⁶ Earnhart, *Glimpses of Eternity*, 81. "From this spiritual cancer arises a heedlessness and harshness toward one's 'inferiors' which is compounded by a disposition never to fully admit one's own wrongs.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴⁹ Wilkins, *Matthew*, 637.

ness freely will release us from our pain. May God help us to be merciful to others and offer a small fraction of the magnanimous offer He has given to us.

Who Is My Neighbor? The Attribute of Selfless Service

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

Dennis G. Allan

Jesus' influence on our world is immeasurable and widespread. We focus, as we should, on the spiritual implications of His life, death and resurrection, but the impact of His short earthly presence permeates the everyday existence of billions of people who do not recognize Him as Lord or Savior. The nearly universal acceptance of the Gregorian calendar is one example, as most people cannot date a document without implicitly acknowledging the belief that Jesus was born a little over 2,000 years ago.

In His brief stories intended to transform hearts, Jesus also shaped the vocabularies of languages spoken around the world. A talent is no longer a monetary unit, but the word survives because of the correct understanding that Jesus was concerned with people burying their abilities. The parable we will now consider turned what would have been an oxymoron into a description adopted internationally to identify hospitals and charitable institutions. The words of Jesus changed a term of derision into a description of the kind and caring.

The parables of Jesus were meant to be understood by ordinary people, and rarely present major difficulties for our comprehension at an intellectual level. Their challenge is in application, as we are called to look inward, and that introspection challenges

us to allow our own hearts to be transformed as we learn to live in imitation of the Master.

The Parable of Four Men on the Road to Jericho

Few parables challenge us more than this simple story, commonly known as the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus draws from the experiences of His hearers with a story that has key elements of modern news stories: violent crime, fear, social inequalities, ethnic prejudice and religious hypocrisy. He goes beyond the headlines, straight to the heart and the attitudes that can easily be allowed to excuse indifference at moments of opportunity and duty.

While this parable was offered in response to questions raised by a lawyer, it helps us to look back in the context to be reminded that the disciples wrestled with the issues that Jesus touches on in this message. Jesus steers His followers to an awareness of the needs of others, knowing that His recently chosen apostles demonstrated a tendency toward selfish ambitions (Luke 9:46). This parable goes to the heart of the problem of carnal prejudice, speaking to followers who were suspicious of those who were different (Luke 9:49). To the men who would be inclined to call fire down from heaven to destroy those who did not immediately accept the Lord,¹ Jesus teaches the importance of reaching out in love (Luke 9:51–54). We should note that the village the sons of thunder were ready to annihilate was in Samaria.² They would not have been likely to use the term “good Samaritan” at that point in their experience.

As the seventy return jubilant with the demonstrations of divine power over demons, Jesus knows that there is still much to be accomplished in the hearts of those closest to Him. The message of repentance is not just a doctrine to be preached to others, but a demand of each individual who would serve Him. The coming of His

¹James and John probably saw the unreceptive Samaritans as no better than the prophets of Baal that Elijah killed after God sent fire down from heaven to consume his sacrifice (1 Kng 18).

²Another approach to understanding Luke 9:51–54 relates it to Gen 18 and 19. Abraham extends hospitality to strangers (Heb 13:2), in contrast to the inhospitable attitude of the people of Sodom, a significant factor in God sending fire from heaven to destroy them (Ezek 16:48–50).

kingdom could not be just a visible event on a certain date, it had to be a true transformation of the heart of every single follower.

A lawyer stood up and asked an excellent question, but for the wrong reason (Luke 10:25). Despite the questioner's intention, Jesus offers him an opportunity. He does not just utter a simple answer, choosing instead to lead him and other listeners to a conclusion that will challenge and change them. He starts the process with a question (Luke 10:26). You are a lawyer, one who studies the Law and the rabbinic discussions of its meaning, so how would you answer your own question?

This expert in the Law answered well (Luke 10:27). Jesus would have said the same thing. In fact, on another occasion, He did (Matt 22:37–40). The problem is not in the question, nor in the answer. The problem lies in his intention and in the application of his own excellent answer, so Jesus challenges him to move from theory to practice (Luke 10:28).

This is a critical point in the exchange, just like one we often face as we hear God's word. What would the lawyer do with the challenge? What do we do with the Lord's teaching? Most of us have some experience working with children and have often heard a child reply to some adult instruction with a phrase that starts with the word "but." It is usually an unwelcome word to the parent or teacher who is trying to guide a child. In situations that involve life and death, the objection raised by the child could even be fatal.

So, the interpreter of the Law is facing a life and death situation, as he has admitted in the initial question. The Lord has approved his answer which comes straight from the Scriptures. How wonderful it would have been if the lawyer had simply said, "Yes, sir. That is exactly what I need and intend to do." How wonderful it would be if we would demonstrate the attitude of submissive sheep and just do what the Lord says and follow where He leads.

I am not denying the importance of careful study to understand what the Lord says, but that is not the issue here, and often is not our issue. The hard sayings of Jesus are often difficult to apply, but rarely hard to comprehend. The honest questioner prepares his heart for an answer that will change his understanding and even

redirect his life. But it is easier to defend our current posture, no matter how wrong it may be, than to allow the Lord's word to penetrate our hardened hearts. It is easy to fall into the habit of preparing our reply even as we are being corrected. When Jeroboam planned his rebuttal instead of taking to heart Abijah's appeal, it cost him the lives of a half million soldiers (2 Chr 13:4–19).

This lawyer was preparing his response, as reflected in the comment accompanying his follow-up question (Luke 10:29). While some highly-paid legal counsellors today make their living by obfuscating facts and finding technical loopholes, this man was not, or should not have been, that kind of lawyer. His role in relationship to the Law of Moses was not so different than the work that many of us do in seeking to clearly expound what the Scriptures teach. We need to learn from the lawyer's mistake and avoid approaching the Lord's teachings with the intention of justifying ourselves. When God speaks, there is no place for rebuttals.

Among Jewish scholars, there has been significant debate through many centuries about the very question this lawyer raised to Jesus. A couple of points brought out in these discussions are worthy of comment here. There are two common interpretations of the expression "love your neighbor as yourself." Most of us would probably understand that we are to love our neighbor as we would love ourselves, and therefore do to him as we would have him do to us, essentially restating the "Golden Rule" of Matthew 7:12. Paul uses this approach when he teaches husbands how to love their wives (Eph 5:28f). The second interpretation is to love your neighbor who is like yourself. Those who favor this interpretation usually apply it in a positive way. Love your neighbor because he is in the same condition that you are, a creature with the same frailties. The idea would be to show true compassion and empathy toward others. John's arguments about loving the brother we can see certainly fit with this concept (1 John 4:20f).

But what might happen if this second interpretation were given an exclusive bent, perhaps from a perspective of haughty religious superiority, suggesting love for the neighbor who closely resembles you? A number of Jewish rabbis have shown this tendency in their

interpretations, suggesting that the responsibility of love for neighbor is real and important, but that it is limited to Jews (so killing Gentiles, especially Arabs, is not too hard to justify for some), or limited to those they define as good Jews (thus even making it easy to ignore the suffering of Jews that do not faithfully follow the same traditions).³ It is not hard to see how a reading of Leviticus 19:17f, isolated from other texts, could lend itself to such interpretations. Of course, we can see flaws to such an approach when we consider the broader context of the Old Testament. In the very same chapter, the Law said foreigners among them were to be afforded basic protections and kindness, in a word, to be loved (Lev 19:33f).⁴

Love for neighbor vs. Carnal prejudice

Returning to Luke 10, it is fair to say that this lawyer had reason to believe he was putting forth a valid question, one that might challenge Jesus and thus might also justify his own conduct. This is a good point to reflect on our own attitudes. Do we study the Scriptures to learn, grow, correct and change, or is our motivation closer to the lawyer's, a desire to reinforce our position and justify ourselves? Do we challenge others to make dramatic changes because of the force of arguments based on the Scriptures while resisting such corrections ourselves?

So, who is my neighbor? Jesus continued with the parable we read in Luke 10:30–35. The setting was familiar to his audience. The twists and turns of the road making the descent of 3,300 feet in a linear distance of fewer than twenty miles made the path from Jerusalem to Jericho an ideal place to assault defenseless travelers.⁵

³For a brief explanation of some of these restrictive views of neighbors among Jewish scholars, see Harold M. Schulweis, "The Ethics of the Neighbor Rabbi," *Journal of Textual Reasoning* : <http://jtr.shanti.virginia.edu/volume-4-number-1/the-ethics-of-the-neighbor-rabbi/>.

⁴Some of the restrictive neighbor explanations among Jews also limited Leviticus 19:34, seeing it as applicable only to foreigners who were in their land. Further discussion and references in Charles A. Kimball, *Jesus' Exposition of the Old Testament in Luke's Gospel* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 128–29.

⁵"Josephus tells us that Herod had dismissed 40 thousand workmen from the Temple, shortly before Christ's recital of this parable, and that a large part of them became vicious highway robbers, who were aided in their diabolical plunder by the hiding places and sharp turnings on the road." Herbert Lockyer, *All the Parables of the Bible* (Grand

The scene was intended to evoke sympathy as Jesus described the traveler who was robbed, beaten and left to die. The victim does not speak and is not identified with more details. All we know is that his descent toward Jericho was cut short by this cruel attack.

Jesus will now introduce the three principal characters in the story. If He had started out by saying to the lawyer, “I want to tell you a story about a priest, a Levite and a Samaritan,” what emotions would those words have probably evoked? Priests were a special class of servants, descendants of Aaron, generally held in high esteem by religious Jews. Levites, their designated assistants, were similarly respected. But a Samaritan? The attitude of Jews toward their mixed-race neighbors was generally quite negative. That helps explain the surprise of the woman at the well that a Jewish man would even give her the time of day (John 4:9). When the Jews accused Jesus of being a demon-possessed Samaritan (John 8:48), it is not clear which they would have considered the greater insult. Jesus Himself recognized a distinction between Jews and Samaritans, identifying the latter as foreigners (Luke 17:16–18) and excluding them from the limited commission when the apostles were first sent out (Matt 10:5f). So, it is fair to say that the lawyer would have expected good things from the priest and Levite but would probably not have imagined any such thing as a “good” Samaritan.⁶ He is in for a surprise.

The priest is the first one on the scene. That he was descending from Jerusalem suggests the possibility that he was headed home after his tour of duty in the temple. So think of yourself headed home after worship on Sunday, your mind full of spiritual thoughts from the Lord’s Supper and the sermon you just heard,

Rapids: Zondervan, 1963), 261.

⁶In addition to the information found in the Scriptures, negative Jewish attitudes about the Samaritans are well-documented in extra-Biblical references. The Apocryphal book of Sirach seems to classify them as worse than the Philistines and Edomites (Sir 50:25–26). There were significant and sometimes bloody conflicts between the Jews and Samaritans in the centuries prior to Jesus’ ministry. It is common to find references in Jewish writings that treat the Samaritans as inferior, foreigners, perpetually unclean and unworthy of the Resurrection. James M. Rochford, “History of the Samaritans,” *Evidence Unseen* (2019): <http://www.evidenceunseen.com/theology/historical-theology/history-of-the-samaritans/>.

the rich lyrics of hymns of praise and love coming from your lips and, all of a sudden, you come upon this victim.

The priest may have thought of his own safety, for it could have been a trap or the thieves could still be nearby. He may have been concerned about becoming ceremonially unclean by contact with the man who was near death. For whatever reason, he was indifferent to the suffering before him and went on his way, keeping his distance.

The next one to come upon the half-dead man is a Levite. He shows the same indifference and continues his journey. Then along comes a Samaritan. He is moved with compassion and stops. He makes sacrifices of time, money and effort to help this stranger. Rather than attributing some special symbolism to the elements of the story such as the oil and wine, we rightly focus on the real point: this man showed compassion and helped. David Wenham comments:

...commentators in previous centuries often interpreted the parable of the good Samaritan in terms of Christ and his redemptive ministry to sinners. Modern commentators, almost with one accord, dismiss that interpretation, and they are probably right to do so. But there is at least one important grain of truth in it: the actions of the Samaritan in the parable are, as we have seen, similar to the actions of the father in the parable of the prodigal son; both feel compassion for one in need, whom they might be expected to treat as their enemy, and both are extraordinarily generous. The similarity is not a coincidence but is because Jesus both exemplified the undeserved love of God himself, including of course to Samaritans, and also called others to the same revolutionary lifestyle. He lived the revolution himself, and invited others to join it.⁷

The Samaritan's kindness was not based on the quality of the assault victim. He did not analyze whether the man deserved to be helped. He got involved when others looked away. Instead of thinking about his own risk and inconvenience, he saw the need of the man who was lying at the side of the road. A despised Samaritan did what the model Jews refused to do.

⁷David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 161.

Jesus follows the parable with another question for the lawyer, intending now to bring him to the answer to his own question: “Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers’ hands?” (Luke 10:36).⁸ There seems to be a twist to the Lord’s question. The lawyer was trying to identify which other people should be called neighbors, but the parable and follow-up question focus on being a neighbor, not defining your neighbors. That fits with the way Jesus routinely taught, bringing the lesson home to the hearer. We do not control our circumstances or the people around us, but we should and can make choices about the people we will be. So, Jesus brings our focus to this question: are we the neighbors we should be? We will come back to that in a moment.

We need to notice the end of this exchange, which might improve our impression of the lawyer. First, he answered the question correctly (although some commentators believe it is significant that he still did not let the word “Samaritan” pass over his lips): “The one who showed mercy toward him” (Luke 10:37). Second, he did not put up any arguments when Jesus told him, for the second time, to apply what he had learned (Luke 10:37, 28). In his exchanges with Jesus, the lawyer went from testing to justifying to understanding.

Do We Understand?

Now back to that main point. What kind of neighbors are we? The parables of Jesus were masterfully designed to provoke introspection and transformation in the hearer. His frequent refrain “he who has an ear, let him hear” not only appears in His discourses in Palestine, but frequently when He addresses churches in the book of Revelation. Jesus is saying to me, and to you, “Go and do the same” (Luke 10:37). What kind of neighbors are we? We need to be the people He calls us to be and, as such, we will do what He calls us to do.

We live in a world where prejudice often clouds judgment and guides actions, a world in which people are despised because of

⁸ All Scripture quotations from the NASB.

skin color, national origin or economic conditions. I have little interest in the political and sociological approaches to these questions, because the Lord has simplified it for me: “Go and do the same.” His words challenge me to be the neighbor that I should be as a follower of the One who loved, and loves, the world.

Carnal prejudice raises its ugly head in our society, but it must not be this way in the Kingdom of our Lord. From Creation to Redemption, we are all in the same category. Paul defended the only true God who “made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth” and who is now “declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent” (Acts 17:26,30). If there is any place that we should be able to look past skin color, bank balances, accents and birth certificates to see people, human beings made in the image of God, people with real needs and eternal souls, it is in the Lord’s kingdom. That means we should pray for all people because God desires that all be saved (1 Tim 2:1–4; 2 Pet 3:9) and sent His Son to die because He loves the world (John 3:16). We who are Christians are immigrants. We have moved into a holy nation where “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

Especially considering the political rhetoric of our time, we must maintain our balance and recognize an important distinction, or we will be rendered useless to help those for whom the Savior died. There is a difference between carnal prejudice and spiritual distinctions. Carnal prejudice devalues a person because of circumstances truly beyond their control. I did not choose where to be born, and neither did you. In the same way, I did not choose to be melanin deficient or of the male sex or to have parents who spoke English instead of Portuguese. God does not care about such things, and neither should we. Peter said to Cornelius: “I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him” (Acts 10:35). In a single sentence, Peter contrasts carnal prejudices and spiritual distinctions. God makes separations based on what we do, not where we

were born. He also teaches us that we are not animals helplessly driven by base instincts. We all struggle with temptations and feel desires to do things that God clearly condemns, and we must decide what to do with those desires.

It is not carnal prejudice or phobia that leads me to label as sinful any sexual relations between two people of the same sex or between single people of the opposite sex. It is, or certainly should be, love that motivates the proclamation of that message. The gospel of the Lord's kingdom, including its clarion call for all sinners to repent, is not hate speech, it is the highest language of love. It is a message that must not be muted by political winds, but it also must not be confused with arrogant and cutting political put-downs that seek to win arguments and elections while driving away the people we should be trying to help. The freedom to speak the truth in love was not granted to us by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, it was granted by our Creator, who will hold us accountable if we fail to use it. But notice that we are to speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15). We are privileged to enter the battlefield in the one war where the objective is to offer life to the enemy's soldiers.

Could the political winds, even where we live and serve, shift so that those who proclaim the truth in love would be condemned, punished, imprisoned or killed? Sure, they could, and history suggests they probably will, if God allows this earth to continue long enough. Could those who express true love be depicted and marginalized as evil, hateful bigots? Sure, they could. So, could speaking the truth in love in an effort to save a neighbor who is dying in sin put us in danger? Sure, it could. Did that Samaritan face no risks when he stopped to help a dying man? Could the muggers have been hiding behind a rock? He made sacrifices and took risks because he was a true neighbor. What kind of neighbors are we?

Separating Sheep and Goats

How does the teaching of Luke 10 fit into the context of New Testament teaching on service to God and neighbors? Jesus endorsed the lawyer's answer about the primary principles of God's will for us and gave the same answer of two great commandments

on another occasion. The apostle John also presents a twofold commandment and makes a shift that helps to tie together the key elements of these commandments. He seems to use belief in Jesus as comparable to love for God and to link the belief with the love and obedience that are necessary to abide in God (1 John 3:23f; John 14:15, 23f). We can see the harm that comes when the second is weighted more heavily than the first, as most modern churches have become more focused on health, happiness and prosperity in this life than on the message of eternal salvation. Terrible injustice is done by those who would exalt the second commandment to the point of overriding the first altogether, suggesting that benevolent souls who do not believe in Jesus and do not obey His word are saved because of their love for neighbors.⁹

There is also a danger of exalting the first and excluding the second. John combats that tendency (1 John 4:20f). Obedience to the second command flows naturally from respect for the first. Love for the Creator leads us to love those made in His likeness. In an even stronger sense, love for the Savior leads us to love those He calls brothers. We must not isolate the Lord's discourse about judgment in Matthew 25:31–46 to suggest that the sole or even primary basis of judgment will be good works toward others, but we also cannot ignore what Jesus said. His words emphasize the concept of being a neighbor, serving others, without a thought for self.

The questions asked by the sheep and the goats are essentially identical and challenge us in our application of the principle of loving as neighbors. The sheep are told that they extended a helping hand to the Lord, and they ask when they had done that. Jesus says that their service to others was accepted as a form of devotion to the Lord, what many call vicarious service. Jesus' language in reference to good deeds done for His brothers, even the least of them, may narrow the emphasis of this judgment scene. Some suggest

⁹It is not uncommon to encounter arguments, even among theologians who consider themselves Christians, using this text to suggest that salvation might be possible without faith in Jesus. For example, Ian Paul, "Interpreting the Sheep and the Goats in Matt 25," *Psephizo* (2019): <https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/interpreting-the-sheep-and-the-goats-in-matt-25/>.

that the primary point is the reaction of the nations to Him and His messengers, receiving or rejecting them. Others focus on benevolence extended toward Christians. Kenneth Chumbley rejects limited interpretations of “these brothers of Mine” in Matthew 25:40, saying “such narrowness smacks of Pharisaism, not Christianity.”¹⁰ If the point is to use this text to deny the teaching of the parable of the Good Samaritan or other teaching about showing love and kindness toward all, then Pharisaism would be an appropriate label, and we would have basically a New Testament version of the limitations many Jews have placed on love in Leviticus 19:18. It does not appear, however, that all those interpretations are so guided. Most focus on the use of term itself, and others emphasize the context of parables about the rejection of the Lord in the midst of the week of Jesus’ great confrontations with those who did not receive Him and would not receive His brothers. Whether or not we see this expression as in some way limited to believers, and whether we see the emphasis of this judgment scene as being benevolence or rejection of the gospel and those who bring it, we must not direct our conclusions to contradict other clear teaching of the Scriptures. It would be wrong to say that we love God if we refuse to love our neighbors, in the broadest sense of that term. It would be equally wrong to defend salvation on the basis of benevolent acts void of faith in Jesus Christ, the Divine King and Judge. It would be wrong to deny that Jesus recognizes vicarious service, and equally wrong to extend that, as some do, to salvation through the acts of faith shown by others, even after one’s death.¹¹

The Lord’s faithful servants are to be received and assisted, and we, as Christians, should be especially sensitive to the needs of those who are in the Lord’s family (3 John 5–11). However, our responsibility to help others is not limited to those who serve the Lord, regardless of how we define Jesus’ little brothers in Matthew 25:40. Let us not succumb to the temptation to imitate rabbinical debates

¹⁰ Kenneth Chumbley, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 2nd ed. (Prairie Papers, 2017), 444.

¹¹ The expression “vicarious service” is employed by Mormon apologists to defend their practice of baptism on behalf of the deceased. “Salvation for the Dead”: <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/1992/06/salvation=-for-the-dead?lang-eng>.

on semantics to flee from responsibility. The real issue is not defining who my neighbor is; it is about being the neighbor I should be.

First and Second Commandments

There is an unmistakable connection between horizontal and vertical relations in the New Testament. While the commandment to love God comes first, it cannot be obeyed if we do not obey the second. Paul described the Philippians' assistance to him as an acceptable offering to God (Phil 4:15–18). This connection between treatment of others and service to God explains why the abusive or negligent husband's prayers are hindered (1 Pet 3:7). It is why the wife who does not fulfill her role at home dishonors God's word (Tit 2:3–5), and why unsettled conflict with a brother can interfere with our service to the Lord (Matt 5:23f).

This essential link between the two great commandments, and the fact that Paul wrote to those who had already committed themselves to the Lord, may help us understand why he sometimes seems to skip over the first and emphasize the second, as is the case both in Romans 13:8–10 and Galatians 5:13–15. Our grasp of what Paul is saying might be enhanced by looking at the arrangement of the other passages that include the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself, an expression found eight times in the Bible. It all starts with Leviticus 19:18. Here we find the first hint of where this path of study will take us, as the verses preceding that instruction include references to some of the Ten Commandments, specifically the commandments against stealing and bearing false witness. In the New Testament, we observe a pattern of linking this commandment of neighbor love with important instructions found in the Old Testament. The most familiar ones are probably Jesus' references to the "two great commandments" (Matt 22:37–39; Mark 12:30f), using the same arrangement employed by the lawyer in Luke 10:27.

Now, let us look at others. In Matthew 19, Jesus repeats five of the Ten Commandments (numbers five through nine) and then, without skipping a beat, jumps to Leviticus 19 to conclude the list with "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 19:18f).

Next, we come to what Paul says in Romans 13. When we compare his words to those of Jesus, we notice the striking similarities. Paul also cites five of the Ten Commandments before going to Leviticus 19:18, but he mentions numbers six through ten. He also adds a comment, “and if there is any other commandment, all are summed up in this saying, namely...,” basically saying what Jesus did in Matthew 22:40. In Galatians 5:14, Paul uses this idea of a summary or fulfilling of the Law without specifically citing other commandments, but he does condemn mistreatment of others (in agreement with the tone of the ethical commandments in the previous examples we have considered) and goes on to include prohibitions of the same nature in his list of works of the flesh. Finally, James describes this second great commandment as “the royal law according to the Scriptures” (James 2:8) in a text where he condemns showing partiality and repeats the sixth and seventh of the Ten Commandments. He then comments on the inseparable nature of faith and works, using acts of benevolence toward a needy brother or sister as examples of active faith.

There is another detail of note. Three of the seven New Testament repetitions of the command to love neighbor as self specifically cite some of the Ten Commandments, and all three of those include the prohibition of murder. In the instruction given just after the Flood, murder is prohibited because humans, distinct from animals, are made in the image of God (Gen 9:6). So, we are to love our neighbor who is like us, because he is also like God, the One who deserves our love above all others.

The ability to offer oneself as a slave to other human beings is predicated on the understanding of submissive slavery to the Lord. Conversely, failure to love others is proof positive that there is no true relationship with God (1 John 3:10; 4:7f). Neither Paul, nor John nor Jesus Himself are saying that Christianity can be reduced to charitable acts, but they are all saying that those who appreciate the love of God will necessarily pass that love along. It is not just about doing things He would do; it is about being like Him.

In the judgment scene of Matthew 25, the goats ask the same question the sheep had asked: when did we act that way? Their ques-

tion seems to be motivated by the same desire for self-justification that the lawyer demonstrated: “We never saw Jesus, so how were we to know to serve Him? Those we saw in need did not look like Him, and certainly did not look like us.” That might get a conversation going with some rabbi, but it sure doesn’t impress the Lord.

The fact that they address Jesus as Lord may be a bit unsettling. Like those who defend themselves in Matthew 7:22f, surprised that they would not be welcomed into the Lord’s presence for eternity, these goats apparently thought they belonged to the Lord and had been serving Him. It is common and plausible to read this account as a preview of the judgment of all people, understanding that even those who lived as wicked unbelievers would confess Jesus as Lord at their condemnation (Phil 2:11). It might be worth the time to go back and read this story of separation again and consider it in light of the two preceding parables. The stories of the ten bridesmaids and of the three investors speak of people who had some relationship as servants of their Lord. Those parables do not seem to be intended to divide the world into two categories of saved and lost, but to challenge and correct the attitudes of those who profess to serve the Lord. The third story of Matthew 25 is, admittedly, perplexing. While Jesus speaks of separating the nations into two categories (vv 31–33), His conversation with the goats has an element of their attempted self-justification and surprise at being condemned.

At the least, we need to see that this is not a separation that will happen solely along the lines of distinction that we may understand in our concept of saved and lost. Jesus, who sees hearts, will judge, and there will be surprises. So if we have figured we were safe in the sheepfold because we have taken certain steps to enter into fellowship with God, and that the goats were unbelievers and outsiders, we probably need to realize that a real live goat might be sitting to our right, or just to the left of that person. Surprising and troubling? Do you suppose the priest and Levite would be surprised to learn the Lord would not receive them with open arms? How sad it would be to have our own self-justifying rationalizations thrown out when we stand before the Judge.

What kind of neighbors are we? Are we clothing, feeding and helping those in need? Paul taught that having the resources to help the needy would be a budget item for Christians, even one of the primary reasons to work (Eph 4:28). We need to hear his instructions to the rich “to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share” (1 Tim 6:18). I understand that there are practical questions that we must answer. Our resources are limited, and we will make different judgment calls about whom and how to help. As Nehemiah did, we will face dangerous situations with prayer and prudence (Neh 4:9). We will work to identify and meet real needs, not just hand out money. What the Samaritan did was much more than just throw money at the problem. He gave time and effort, suffered inconvenience and faced danger to help. Negligence and indifference are unacceptable answers to such practical questions.

Let us be vigilant so as not to yield to the carnal prejudices that hinder getting involved and helping when we should. We are not members of an upper caste in a system that turns a blind eye to the suffering of untouchables, we are disciples of the God who came down and made Himself a slave for our benefit (Phil 2:5–8). As such, we are called to serve, to show hospitality, to place the needs of others above our own and to weep with those who weep (Rom 12:10–15).

Let us turn our attention back to the sheep, as their reaction helps us understand a crucial point. They asked Him: Lord, when did we do these things? These sheep were unaware of what they had done. It seems they had learned what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, and this helps us see what He is teaching us about neighbor love. In that grand message, part of what He said was that good deeds should not be motivated by the desire to get credit from others (Matt 6:2). That is hard enough, because it is so easy to allow our desire for validation to fill our lungs and blast those trumpets. Just as self-pity and arrogance are two sides of the same coin, the temptation to boast is often as great for the one who feels inferior as it is for the one who feels superior. In both cases, it is motivated by the same fundamental problem: preoccupation with self.

I imagine most of us have had the privilege of knowing people who personified this godly attitude of selfless service. How often have we visited someone who was facing special difficulties only to hear the name of a brother or sister who had already generously helped? We would never hear it from the mouth of that brother or sister, but their benevolent deeds could be laid out by others like the tunics and garments that Dorcas made.

There is more to what Jesus says (Matt 6:3f). How can the right hand hide what it does from the left hand? When I read over the topics assigned for this series, I really appreciated one word used in each of today's titles. We were not invited here today just to think about actions, lists of things Christians should or should not do. We are focusing on attributes. In this specific message, we are not defining what our neighbor looks like, or even what neighborly acts we might do. We are being invited to be neighbors, to incorporate the attribute of selfless service.

Lawyers, Priests, Levites, Samaritans and Us

Although it is not the case here today, it is common to reach the end of a lesson in some forums and ask for questions. I suspect that many of us have observed that the studies of the parables seem to generate fewer questions than many other Bible texts. The simplicity of stories about familiar things makes the parables generally accessible, which was certainly Christ's intention (Luke 10:21). When the lawyer questioned Jesus, I do not doubt that the Lord could have dissected rabbinical debates and offered arguments that would have impressed the sharpest of philosophers. As Creator of the Universe, the One who gave human beings the capacity to think and to speak, He surely could have spoken circles around the most intellectual of men. But Jesus wanted to reach hearts, not heads. He wanted to transform people, not win debates. So, He chose to communicate in terms we can understand.

So where would we fit in if we had an active role in the story? The parable of the Good Samaritan may not overwhelm us intellectually, but I confess that it does overwhelm me as it speaks to the essence of discipleship. As I tried to think about practical applications

to conclude this lesson, I imagined the faces of people who would be here today listening. What will they need to hear? What should I tell them they should do to be good neighbors? I finally gave up. I could not find the words or see the applications for others because of the mirror on the wall. So, I am not going to try to tell you how to be a good neighbor. I am just going to offer a few comments about the challenges I have in attempting to absorb what Jesus is teaching us.

I need to see that being a Christian, being a sheep, is more than fulfilling a checklist to get into the right group, even if everything on that list is good, important and essential to our salvation. I need to see those around me as people made in the image of God and measure their value solely on that basis. Differences that matter to carnal people—national origin, skin color, educational, social or economic status—cannot matter to me because they don't matter to God. I need to love my neighbors enough to show them the need to repent and submit to the King who loves them and died for them. I cannot be blind to their sins, but I can help them see the solution rather than judging them unworthy before they even hear the gospel. I need to remember that those who are often respected for being religious and spiritual may be the ones that are furthest from God. This is scary, because people around me generally see me as a religious and spiritual person. I need to try to hear, from God's perspective, my explanations for why I choose to use my resources and opportunities as I do. Do I do what is best for my neighbor, or what I think is best for me? It doesn't matter if my rationalizations would impress scribes and Pharisees, for God is the one who will judge me. Finally, if I feel satisfied that I got the point and am doing a pretty good job of being a neighbor, that probably just proves that I need to go back and read that parable again.

Paul Johnson describes mercy as "... a marvelous thing: a form of moral poetry. When we show mercy spontaneously, gladly, freely, instantly, not thoughtlessly but unthinkingly and happily, we behave not just in kingly fashion but like God himself—it is the best way to show we are made in his image."¹²

¹²Paul Johnson, *Jesus: A Biography from a Believer* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2019), 14.

May God be merciful and patient toward us as we seek to develop the attributes that define His servants, the attributes that reflect His divine perfection. *“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love”* (1 John 4:7f).

What Will He Do? The Coming Judgment of the King

The Parable of the Wicked Tenants in the Vineyard

Dominic Venuso

“When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants” (Matt 21:40)?¹ This is the central question of the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. This parable is typically categorized as a juridical parable.² A juridical parable gives the listener a third-party situation to guide them to render a judgment against themselves. The most well-known example of this is Nathan’s parable to David about the stolen lamb (2 Sam 12:1–12). By the end of our parable, we are meant to be able to answer the question: “What will the owner of the vineyard do?” In Matthew 21:33–41, Jesus’ use of Isaiah 5 and the vineyard imagery will show us why God judges. In Matthew 21:42–44, Jesus’ use of Psalm 118 will show us how judgment fits into God’s plans to bless the nations. Once we have been brought to the answer of the parable, we will make application to ourselves. First, we need to note the context of the parable.

“By What Authority?” The Various Contexts of The Parable

First, note the original context of the parable: Jesus’ final week. Matthew 21 begins with Jesus entering Jerusalem as its King (vv

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations are from the ESV.

² Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 276.

1–11). The crowd shouts, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” (v 9; *cf.* Psa 118:26). Jesus drives out the people who were exploiting the temple complex for their own profit (21:12f). He heals the broken souls excluded from the temple grounds and neglected by the leadership (v 14). The King is setting things right in His city. But there’s a problem. The city already has ruling officials. They confront Him, “By what authority are you doing these things?” (vv 15–17, 23–27). Jesus responds, “The baptism of John, from where did it come?” (21:25). They play politics: “We do not know” (v 26). This is the story of a power struggle between the King and the powers threatened by the King. Jesus tells the Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Matt 21:33–46; Mark 12:1–12; Luke 20:9–19).

Second, note the context of the first readers of the parable: the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Most of Christian history took this setting as its departure point, reading the parable as an allegory for salvation history, as God judged Israel and called the Gentiles into His purposes.³

The Vineyard and the Rejected Tenants (Matt 21:33–41; Isa 5)

The parable begins with a man planting a vineyard (Matt 21:33). The vineyard imagery is rooted in a rich Old Testament background (Isa 5; 27:2–6; Hos 10:1; Jer 2:21; 12:10; Ezek 15:6; 19:1–140; Psa 80:8–18).⁴ This background reveals the purpose of Israel, and so, prepares us for the purpose of judgment. It all begins in Genesis 1–12. Humanity falls into sin. They are kicked out of the garden. Violence and bloodshed fill the earth. All nations are cursed. Then, God promises that Abraham’s seed would bless the nations (Gen 12:2; 22:18). Eventually, the seed becomes a vine (Jer 2:21). The vine becomes a vineyard (Isa 5). One day, the vineyard would “fill the whole world with fruit” (Isa 27:6; *cf.* 37:30f; 45:8; 57:19). At the end of God’s work through Israel, in Isaiah’s new heavens and new

³Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1997), 704–5.

⁴Craig A. Evans, “On the Vineyard Parables of Isaiah 5 and Mark 12,” *Biblische Zeitschrift* 28 (1984): 86. See also in Jewish literature: 1 Enoch 10.16; 84.6; Jubilees 1.16; Psalms of Solomon 14.3–4.

earth, “They will plant vineyards and eat their fruit” (65:21). In fulfillment of the seed promise, the vineyard will bear fruit.

Isaiah 5 is one of the most important developments in the seed-vineyard-fruit trajectory. It is also the main vineyard text alluded to by our parable.⁵ By the time we get to Isaiah 5, Israel is a vineyard. God has brought them where they need to be to bear fruit. The chapter begins with a prophet inviting the busy denizens of Jerusalem to hear a love song (vv 1–2a), “My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He... planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes.” But there is a problem (vv 2b, 5): “he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit... He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!” “Justice” here does not refer to Batman’s “justice”—retributive justice. God was looking for the justice that defends “the oppressed,” takes “up the cause of the fatherless,” and pleads “the case of the widow” (Isa 1:17 NIV). Instead of the land producing the fruit of justice for the nations, land ownership became the sole privilege of an ever-diminishing number of wealthy individuals (vv 8–10). In v 4, God asks the key question: “What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it?” All of God’s efforts to restore the vineyard were rebuffed. Holy days became drunken parties (vv 11f). The people called evil good and good evil (v 20). They were wise in their own eyes (v 21). Their drunken judges miscarried justice (vv 22–23). Nothing more could be done. It was time for judgment (vv 5f, 13–17, 24f). What began as the lovely ballad of the beloved’s vineyard, ends with God whistling for wild beasts to trample the vineyard (vv 26–30).

Jesus takes the vineyard imagery and applies it to His own day. He introduces a new element to the imagery: the vineyard is in the care of tenants (Matt 21:33). The focus shifts from the vineyard to those put in charge of the vineyard, the leaders of Israel. Still, the concern for fruit is key. It is a major theme throughout Matthew’s gospel. John preached, “Bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matt 3:8), warning that “Every tree therefore that does not bear

⁵ Evans, “On the Vineyard Parables of Isaiah 5 and Mark 12.”

good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Matt 3:10). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that a tree is known by its fruit (7:16–20). “Make the tree good and its fruit good” (12:33). The seed sown on good ground is the seed that “bears fruit” (13:23; *cf.* v 26). In the immediate context of our parable, as His first act as King in Jerusalem, Jesus curses the unfruitful fig tree: “May you never bear fruit” (21:19).⁶ In our parable, the owner plants a vineyard, with a winepress ready to go, because the vineyard is for fruit.⁷ The juridical parable takes us by the hand and begins to take us to the answer. If the owner gives the tenants privilege and power, but they do not bear fruit, what will the owner of the vineyard do?

The Unfruitful Tenants Reject the Servants (Matt 21:34–36)

The parable of the wicked tenants continues with the owner sending servants to collect the fruit of his vineyard (Matt 21:34). The servants represent the prophets.⁸ In Matthew’s account of the parable, there are two delegations. Probably, they represent Matthew’s “prophets” and “righteous men” (Mt 10:41; 13:17; 23:29, 34f).⁹ Throughout history, God sent His servants to call Israel to repentance, but they did not listen (Jer 7:25f; 25:4f).¹⁰

Matthew’s Parable of the Two Sons illuminates the point here (Matt 21:28–32). The parable follows the question about authority and precedes the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. The story is straightforward. A vineyard owner has two sons. He orders his sons

⁶ Matthew 26:29 uses a different word.

⁷ D. A. Carson, Walter W. Wessel, and Walter L. Liefeld, *Matthew, Mark, Luke*, EBC (London: Zondervan, 1984), 452.

⁸ Amos 3:7; Zechariah 1:4–6; *cf.* Matthew 23:29–38, which uses similar language and also cites Psalm 118.

⁹ Allen W. Martens, “‘Producing Fruit Worthy of Repentance’: Parables of Judgment Against The Jewish Religious Leaders and The Nation (Matthew 21:28–22:14 Par.; Luke 13:6–9),” in *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker, McMaster New Testament Studies (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 159. Alternatively, most see the two delegations as the former and latter prophets. See, for example: Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 513.

¹⁰ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, PNTC 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 357.

to work the vineyard. The first says he will not do the work but does it anyway. The second says he will but does not. “Which of the two did the will of his father?” As another juridical parable, the crowd can answer the question: “The first” (Matt 21:31). At this point, the parable is that sort of harmless story many ancient authors told: “It’s not what you say that matters, it’s what you do.”¹¹ True enough. Though redaction critics often doubt the authenticity of Jesus’ interpretation,¹² it is His interpretation that packs all the punch (Matt 21:31f).¹³ Jesus says that leaders who were circumcised, observed the food laws, and kept the sabbath, were the ones who profess to do the Father’s will but fail to do it. Worse still, He says the tax collectors and prostitutes—those infamous, traitorous, public sinners—are the ones who do the will of the Father.¹⁴ What then does it mean to do the will of the Father? Three times in the interpretation of the parable, Jesus uses the word “believe” (v 32). To do the Father’s will is to believe John the Baptist. Remember, this is the John the religious leaders refused to weigh in on just a moment ago. No wonder the conflict escalates. Jesus insists: faith is essential to the work of the vineyard. To reject the prophets is to reject the work of the vineyard.

Just like the second son in the Parable of the Two Sons, the wicked tenants reject the servants (Matt 21:35f). In their unbelief, they multiply violence and bloodshed. They produce the same bitter fruit for which God destroyed the vineyard so long ago (Isa 5:7). The parable leads us a step further toward the answer. If the unfruitful tenants will not repent at the word of the servants, what will the owner of the vineyard do?

The Unfruitful Tenants Kill the Beloved Son (Matt 21:37–39)

The owner, still committed to seeing the fruit of the vineyard, sends his son to the tenants (Matt 21:37). Up to this point, the par-

¹¹ For examples of other such parables, see Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 267–68.

¹² They usually see it as a creation from Luke 7:29; typical is Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 3rd ed. (London: S.C.M. Press, 1972), 80–81.

¹³ Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 1992), 322.

¹⁴ J. Gibson, “Hoi Telónai Kai Hai Pornai,” *JTS* 32 (1981): 429–33.

able has been grounded in realistic first century practices.¹⁵ There is historical evidence of people leasing land to tenants while they are away,¹⁶ contract disputes between landowner and tenants, and violence over land ownership.¹⁷ Now, we come to two features that strain realism. First, while there is evidence of men sending their sons to do what servants could not,¹⁸ it is difficult to imagine a man being so naïve as to think that the murderers would treat his son kindly. But this is the point. As Chrysostom put it, “This is not the language of an ignorant man. Away with the thought! Rather, it is the language of one desiring to show the sin to be great and inexcusable.”¹⁹ It reveals what the leaders of Israel ought to have done. It reveals God’s extraordinary patience.²⁰ In Isaiah 5, God asked, “What more could be done than I have already done?” By sending His Son, God has done something more.²¹ This is a new and decisive development in the history of the vineyard. In Isaiah 5, God decided to deliver the vineyard to the nations. At exactly the same point in this retelling of the parable, God delivers His Son to the tenants. Unlike the owner who naively risked his son, God sent His son *to* die. He did it that the vineyard may be delivered from the nations.

Rather than seeing the owner’s mercy in the sending of the son, the tenants kill the son (Matt 21:38f). They think that they will in-

¹⁵Rami Arav and John J. Rousseau, “Viticulture,” in *Jesus and His World: An Archaeological and Cultural Dictionary* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 328–32; J. Duncan M. Derrett, *Law in the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1970), 286–312.

¹⁶Craig A. Evans, “Jesus’ Parable of the Tenant Farmers in Light of Lease Agreements in Antiquity,” *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 14 (1996): 65–83.

¹⁷Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations, 50 B.C. to A.D. 284* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), 6–12; R. A. Kearsley and S. R. Llewelyn, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity, Volume 7: A Review of the Greek Inscriptions and Papyri Published 1982–83* (North Ryde, NSW: Macquarie University, 1994), 130–62.

¹⁸m. Shebu’ot 4.12; John S Kloppenborg, “Isaiah 5:1–7, the Parable of the Tenants and Vineyard Leases on Papyrus,” in *Text and Artifact in the Religions of Mediterranean Antiquity: Essays in Honour of Peter Richardson*, Studies in Judaism and Christianity 9 (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2000) 322–26.

¹⁹*Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew* 68, as translated in Manlio Simonetti, *Matthew 14–28*, Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture: New Testament 1b (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 140.

²⁰Blomberg, *Matthew*, 325–26.

²¹Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 358.

herit the land by force. This is the second unrealistic feature of the parable from a historical perspective. Just as the naivety of the owner highlights the patience of God, the foolhardiness of the tenants floodlights the rebellion of the Jerusalem establishment. The tenants want ownership at any cost, no matter how illegal or unreasonable.²² They try to “inherit” God’s vineyard the same way Ahab “inherited” Naboth’s vineyard: murder.²³ The leaders of Israel have gone so wrong that to send the son to the vineyard is to “deliver over” the Son to the “chief priests and the scribes.” It is to “deliver him over to the nations” (Mark 10:33f; 15:15). Through the rejection of the leaders, Jesus bears the typical punishment that was due Israel.²⁴ Even as God was providing a new way for the vineyard to be saved, the leaders persisted in rebellion. What more could God do?

By comparing Himself to the son, Jesus publicly claims the identity given to Him by God at the baptism of John.²⁵ They asked Him what right He has to come into their city acting like He owns the place (21:23–27).²⁶ He asked them about the baptism of John. He called out their rejection of John (21:28–32). If they would have taken John seriously, they would know that at the baptism of John, Jesus was declared to be the beloved Son (Matt 3:14). Just as they rejected John, they will reject the one declared to be the beloved Son. Instead of submitting to the Son, they will throw the claim of sonship in His face at the climactic moment of the trial to condemn Him to death (Matt 26:63). The juridical parable has done its

²² See: m. B. Bat. 3:3, which suggests the tenants were mistaken in thinking they could acquire the land this way; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 1st ed., *Hermeneia* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 37.

²³ Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 514. The LXX of 3 Kingdoms 20:15–16 uses the word *kleronomei*.

²⁴ E.g. Psalm 106:40–41; S. Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 70.

²⁵ See “son” in 2 Samuel 7; Psalm 2:7; Jack Dean Kingsbury, “The Parable of the Wicked Tenants,” *Interpretation* 39 (1985): 320. It may be Jesus’ first public acknowledgement of His messianic identity. This identification is even clearer in Mark and Luke, who have the “beloved son.” It is unclear why Matthew omits “beloved” here.

²⁶ Jack Dean Kingsbury, “The Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen and the Secret of Jesus’ Divine Sonship in Matthew: Some Literary-Critical Observations,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105 (1986): 653.

job. We can answer the question. If the owner risked his beloved son to save the tenants from judgment, but the tenants killed the son, what will the owner of the vineyard do?

What Will the Owner of the Vineyard Do? (Matt 21:40f)

If God's vineyard is not good for fruit, then it is good for nothing.²⁷ God's people are blessed to be a blessing. Fruitfulness and security go hand-in-hand.²⁸ To allow the vineyard to continue as it is, in the hands of wicked tenants, would essentially have God subsidizing evil (Hos 10:1). Do you know any serious gardeners? The vegetables are delicious. The flowers are perennially beautiful. Imagine you visit your master gardener. Their garden is overrun with weeds, thorns, and poison ivy. You see your friend bending down carefully applying miracle grow to the poison ivy. What would you think? You don't rid the garden of weeds by feeding the weeds. In the case of Jerusalem, the whole city, the whole system, had gone bad. Any blessing that God pumps into the city just inflates the pride of the city and subsidizes the oppression. What can God do that He has not already done? Can He just keep letting things continue? How will He bring blessings to the nations while the vineyard is in the care of wicked tenants? How will He end the bloodshed and restore the garden?

What will He do? In Matthew's gospel, the crowd answers: "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end... and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time." (Matt 21:41 NIV). In Mark and Luke, Jesus answers: "He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others" (Mark 12:9). In Luke, the crowd reacts in horror: "Surely not!" (Luke 20:16). Perhaps, the apparent contradiction between Matthew and Luke is resolved in the conflicted hearts of the people, knowing what God ought to do in principle, but not wanting Him to do it to them. Sadly, the problem of initially seeing what ought to be done in principle, but not seeing what ought to

²⁷ J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (London: IVP Academic, 2015), 68.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

be done to you, is a problem as old as juridical parables (2 Sam 12). Even in our day, most believe oppressors should be judged. Few in our day are happy to see such judgment directed at themselves. God is not likewise inconsistent. Where privilege and power result only in more land cursed by thorns and thistles, there will be judgment. What will He do? He will destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to those who will “give him the fruits in their seasons” (Matt 21:41; *cf.* Psa 1:3).²⁹

The Temple and the Rejected Son (Matt 21:42–44; Psa 118)

After Jesus tells the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, He turns to the future of the vineyard. Judgment is not the end of the story. Jesus quotes Psalm 118:22–24 and asks, “Have you not read?” (Matt 21:42). The crowds had, only a couple of days prior, recited another verse from that same psalm to him (Matt 21:9; Psa 118:26). As part of the Egyptian Hallel (Psa 113–118), the psalm was sung on pilgrimages to the temple. They have read about the stone that was rejected, but have they understood?

It may seem strange to shift from the imagery of a vineyard to the imagery of a stone in the temple. A few things may explain this shift. First, focusing on the tower that was “built,” the Jews came to understand Isaiah 5 as God’s judgment on the temple by the Babylonians.³⁰ The restoration of the vineyard would require the “building” of a new Temple (as in Psa 118). Second, in Psalm 80 (another vineyard text), the failure and judgment of the vineyard is in the past. The key to the restoration of the vineyard? The “son” (vv 15, 17). Third, and most importantly, though Psalm 118 is not a vineyard text or a son text, it is a stone text. That may not mean much to us English speakers or how we interpret the Bible, but the Jews commonly made a world play between “son” and “stone” (*cf.* Matt 3:9; Luke 3:8).³¹ In their way of thinking, in Jesus’ way of thinking,

²⁹ Olmstead, *Matthew’s Trilogy of Parables*, 115.

³⁰ Evans, “On the Vineyard Parables of Isaiah 5 and Mark 12,” 248. Some also note that “the vineyard” is “the house of Israel” (Isa 5:7).

³¹ Matthew Black, “Christological Use of the Old Testament in the New Testament,” *New Testament Studies* 18 (1971): 1–14. For example, in the Greek of Josephus *Wars*

a stone text *is* a son text. In short, the parable tells the story of the rejected son and the judgment of the old temple. Psalm 118 tells the story of the rejected stone and the building of the new temple. They are telling two sides of the same story. One illuminates the other. So, what does Psalm 118 mean and how does it apply to Jesus?

Psalm 113–117 walks the singing pilgrims through the new exodus. In Psalm 118, God's people arrive at the gates of the new temple, a temple still in construction (vv 19–27).³² The part Jesus quotes portrays builders picking up a stone, looking at it, not finding it useful, and laying it aside. When they get to the end, they find that the stone they had rejected all along fits perfectly into the key position.³³ Most likely, the stone was originally Israel and her kings.³⁴ Israel was rejected by the nations but chosen by God (Psa 118:10–12, 17f). She was at the center of God's plans to cause the nations to praise the Lord (Psa 117:1; cf. Isa 56:7; Mark 11:17). This promise of national vindication was normally a comfort to Israel, but Jesus uses it to confront them.³⁵ As Jesus just showed in the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, Israel failed to realize her purpose. Indeed, she is among the nations who reject Jesus. So, Jesus interprets Psalm 118 in a new way: Israel would need a new King to embody all that she failed to be.³⁶ They needed a son who would say *yes and* do the Father's will.³⁷ In the Messiah, the purposes of Israel would be realized. What was true of

5.272: "When the engine was let go, and the stone came from it, they cried out aloud in their vernacular, "The son is coming!"

³²Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 497–501.

³³David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus, The Jesus Library* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 128. For the rock as cornerstone, see R. J. McKelvey, "Christ the Cornerstone," *NTS* 8 (1962): 352–59. For rock as top stone, see Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 429.

³⁴Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 1603.

³⁵Bock, *Luke* 9, 1603.

³⁶Later Jewish writers end up making this same move; Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 497–501. The kind of move was used by Jewish interpreters in Jesus' day. See Charles A. Kimball, *Jesus' Exposition of the Old Testament in Luke's Gospel*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 94 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994).

³⁷Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew*, First. (Atlanta, GA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975), 412.

the nation, would be truer of the King. He would be rejected by the nations but vindicated by God. Jesus is that King.

Though scholarly opinion has shifted toward recognizing the parable of the wicked tenants as authentic, many still see the hand of the early church in the addition of Psalm 118.³⁸ There are several arguments for its authenticity, but the strongest is that Psalm 118 reveals the twist and point of the parable.³⁹ Without Psalm 118, the parable lacks its punch. The religious leaders might agree that the vineyard has been entrusted to wicked tenants who needed to be removed (for instance, the Romans).⁴⁰ By using Psalm 118 at this point, Jesus makes plain that He is speaking of them. The Jewish leaders are the “builders.”⁴¹ Jesus is the one who was identified by the crowds as “the one who comes in the name of the Lord” in this Psalm (Matt 21:9). He is the murdered son, the rejected stone. The tenants will be removed. Jesus will be established as the center of God’s purposes in the world.

Matthew and Luke include two explanatory statements about the stone (Matt 21:44; Luke 20:18). The first, “the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces,” is likely drawn from Isaiah 8:14 and Zechariah 4:7–10. Together, these passages affirm that the building of the new temple is as certain as God is mighty. Nothing will stop Him. The second explanatory statement, “when it falls on anyone, it will crush him,” is drawn from the imagery of Daniel 2:34f; 44f.⁴² This is a shocking use of Daniel 2. It means that the

³⁸ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Volume V: Probing the Authenticity of the Parables* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

³⁹ Other arguments: Psalm 118 follows the parable even in the minimalistic version in the Gospel of Thomas 65–66 where there is no clear link for why it is included. The gospels record Jesus using the Psalm in His lament over Jerusalem (Matt 23:39; Luke 13:35) and in His passion predictions (Mark 8:31; Luke 9:22; 17:25). See: Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 289–90.

⁴⁰ Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 290.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 290, 683; David Stern, “Jesus’ Parables from the Perspective of Rabbinic Literature: The Example of the Wicked Husbandmen,” in *Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschogrod (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 42–80. Examples: 1QIsa^a 54:13; CD 4:19; 8:12; b. Sabbat 114a; b. Berakot 64a; Song Rab 1.5.3; Exod. Rab. 33.10; Targum Pss. 118:22–29.

⁴² Edward Earle Ellis, “How the New Testament Uses the Old,” in *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, ed. I. Howard Marshall (Carlisle: Pa-

temple system was part of the evil nations to be crushed by the stone.⁴³ While the Essenes and other counter-temple movements out in the wilderness would have agreed that the temple system was corrupt and in need of cleansing and judgment,⁴⁴ Jesus entered the city with popular support, cleansed the temple, and announced the judgment in their presence.⁴⁵ He came to their doorstep and essentially said, “Either you surrender to my authority or you will be crushed along with the rest of the idolatrous nations.” *That’s* the kind of thing that will get someone crucified. When the religious leaders reject Him, they only confirm His identity. The murdered son, the rejected stone, is the chosen King.

The People Bearing Its Fruits

The story does not end with the vindication and exaltation of Jesus. Jesus is the cornerstone, but in Him God is building a new community.⁴⁶ Along the way, we have been noting realistic and unrealistic features of the parables. Here, we come to the most unrealistic of all. Somehow, the rejected son becomes the key to the new temple. He leads a new people. As Meier observes, this is not only unrealistic in the thought-world of the parable, it is “beyond all human capacity and beyond the realm of human time and space,” since it implies that the son who is killed will be raised.⁴⁷ When Jesus was raised from the dead, Psalm 118 became a favorite of the early church. They saw what happened. They concluded, “This is the Lord’s doing and it is marvelous in our eyes” (Psa 118:23).

What exactly is this new temple? When Jesus said He was giving the kingdom to “others” (Mark and Luke), to “a people producing its fruits” (Matt 21:43), to whom was He referring? The original audience would reasonably have taken Jesus to be referring to Himself and His disciples at that time,⁴⁸ but what about

ternoster Press, 1977), 205.

⁴³ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 497–501.

⁴⁴ Psalms of Solomon 18:8; 1QpHab 8:3–13.

⁴⁵ Nicholas Perrin, *Jesus the Temple* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010).

⁴⁶ Martens, “Producing Fruit,” 161.

⁴⁷ Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 248–49.

⁴⁸ Evans, *Mark 8*, 327.

going forward?⁴⁹ Some argue that “people” refers to the church. Luke’s account reads this way as it leads in to Acts. Matthew does have Jesus using the word “church” (Matt 16:18; 26:61; 27:40), but he does not use that word here.⁵⁰ The “nation” is commonly taken to refer to Gentiles.⁵¹ Of course, one would have expected “nations” rather than “nation,” if that were so. I am not aware of any New Testament text, let alone in Matthew, that affirms a complete replacement of Israel with the Gentiles. *Jewish* tax collectors and prostitutes enter the Kingdom (Matt 21:31f).⁵² The vineyard *is* Israel (Isa 5:7). The promise of the Kingdom of God belongs to them (Rom 9:4). The kingdom is taken from the tenants, not from Israel (Matt 21:43). The parable teaches that the promises would not come through the present temple complex, arranged as it was under wicked tenants. Instead, they would come in a new—but still Abrahamic—arrangement (*cf.* Rom 11).⁵³ The blessings would come in the true heir of the promises, the true Israel, the true temple, Jesus Christ. Our hope is for all Israel to be saved (Rom 11:26). I must note the horrifying reality that texts like this one have wrongly been used to justify and to motivate anti-Semitism and bloodshed. Let us be clear: to take the teachings of this text as justification for anti-Semitism, for violence, for bloodshed, is to produce the same bitter fruit for which the temple power complex was judged. Remember, “He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!” (Isa 5:7). We must not leave this text with the seeds of bitter fruit. We must leave this text committed to bearing the fruit of blessing for all nations, including Israel. The “nation” is not simply the Gentiles, although the parable points to Gentile inclusion.

⁴⁹ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Mark: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 286.

⁵⁰ Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 42.

⁵¹ Kelly R. Iverson, “Jews, Gentiles, and the Kingdom of God: The Parable of the Wicked Tenants in Narrative Perspective (Mark 12:1–12),” *Biblical Interpretation* 20 (2012): 305–35.

⁵² Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 275.

⁵³ Olmstead, *Matthew’s Trilogy of Parables*.

In the end, the identity of the “people” that Jesus gives in Matthew’s gospel is the best and most challenging. They are the “tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons” (Matt 21:41). They are “a people producing its fruits” (v 43). This identification keeps the aim of the vineyard front and center. There are many useful metaphors for the people of God. The vineyard metaphor emphasizes the point that God’s people bear fruit. This description is necessary to all others. Only those who abide in Jesus and bear fruit prove to be His disciples (John 15:2, 5, 8). The church over which Christ is head is the church that bears fruit (Col 1:18, 5f, 10).⁵⁴ The gentiles who are grafted into Israel must beware of pride, since “if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare” them (Rom 11:20f). The new temple is composed of living stones whose lives are patterned on the suffering and sacrifice of the rejected cornerstone (1 Pet 2:4–10). In Matthew’s gospel, the Parable of the Wicked Tenants is part of one of Matthew’s sets of three (Matt 21:28–22:1–14).⁵⁵ In in all three, privilege is given, privilege is wasted, and privilege is taken and given to others.⁵⁶ The point? God’s people are not identified by the privilege they are shown or the promises they make, but by their performance.⁵⁷ Labels, boasts, and signs on church buildings are not decisive. In Matthew, God’s people show that they are heirs by the strangers they take in (Matt 25:35f), the hatred they face from wicked tenants (10:22)—by their cruciform lives (16:24). The kingdom is given to the people who produce its fruit. The identity of the heirs of the vineyard is found in the eternal purpose of the vineyard.

⁵⁴ The fruit of the Spirit is borne among those who “belong to Jesus Christ,” to those who “have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires (Gal 5:19–24). “[T]o walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him” is to be “bearing fruit in every good work” (Col 1:10). The end of judgment and faith is life in the New Heavens and New Earth, the global garden of God: “through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations” (Rev 22:2).

⁵⁵ Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 196–97. On Matthew’s use of threes: W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew Vol. 3*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 62–87.

⁵⁶ Martens, “Producing Fruit,” 155–56.

⁵⁷ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 322.

Response (Matt 21:45f)

Normally, the truths of the kingdom were hidden by the parables (Matt 13:10–17; Mark 4:10–12; Luke 8:9f). Here, the enemies understood he was talking about them, since He was using familiar passages (Matt 21:45; Mark 12:12; Luke 20:19). Still, they do not repent.

How could they understand, but not repent? Imagine a man walks in from the street, enters a self-proclaimed sound church, stands in the pulpit, and starts rebuking them. He points to how many older children there are in foster care in their cities and how few Christians are taking them in. He recounts the cruel things people have said and done to those in their number who experience same-sex attraction. He draws attention to every opportunity that they passed over to proclaim the good news to their neighbors. He concludes: “God is going to take the kingdom from you and give it to others. The Muslims, illegal immigrants, and baby-killers are going to enter into the kingdom before you.” As Wright says of this parable, “Someone who is telling strangely familiar stories *and meaning the wrong things by them* will land up in trouble.”⁵⁸ Jesus came to the temple, the city of the chosen people, and He said that they were in league with the wicked nations. They understand, and are offended by, His judgmental words.

The leaders respond to the parable by fulfilling the parable. They want Jesus dead, but are afraid of the crowds (Matt 21:46). So, they plot to turn popular opinion against Him (22:15). They formed a broad coalition to attack the Beloved Son (22:16; 23:23). Eventually, the rest of the parable came true. The wicked tenants, along with the Roman powers, crucified Jesus. On the third day, He rose again. In 70 AD, in fulfillment of the parable of the wicked tenants, Jerusalem’s day came. God whistled for the beastly armies of Rome to destroy the temple and to dismantle the unjust system. All the while, the work of the vineyard was taken up by others. It continued to grow and bear fruit unto eternal life. It continues to bear fruit today. “This is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes” (Psa 118:23).

⁵⁸ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 179.

What Will He Do Today?

Does the parable apply in our day? While the judgment was originally about 70 AD, three features point toward continued application. First, Jesus was not the first to ask something like “what will the owner of the vineyard do?” As we saw above, His question adapted Isaiah’s centuries-old question. In John 15:1–11, Jesus adapts the same argument to another audience, His disciples. The vineyard logic is reused because the Holy One of Israel is eternal and God’s purposes for the vineyard are ongoing. If we see the privileged failing to bear fruit in our day, what will the owner of the vineyard do? We know the answer: “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end” (Matt 21:41 NIV; *cf.* John 15:2; Isa 5:5).

Second, Jesus’ use of the crushing stone of Daniel 2 implies broader application (Matt 21:44). In Daniel 2, the stone does not specifically crush Jerusalem. It does not even only crush the fourth empire, Rome. The stone shatters the entire image of rebellious, idolatrous human power (Dan 2:34f). The temple system is part of the idolatrous, rebellious powers to be crushed by the stone, but it is not all that is crushed. Remember that in that text, the stone does this work progressively, “the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth” (Dan 2:35). The kingdom has been inaugurated. It struck a critical blow against the feet of iron and clay. One day, the whole image will be shattered. Wherever God has given power and privilege, but people hoard it for themselves, judgment will follow.

Third, the vineyard theme grows in intensity as it is developed throughout salvation history. The seed becomes a vine, the vine a vineyard, the vineyard is given every possible chance to bear fruit, and Jesus is sent to the vineyard. The force of the question, “what more could be done than I have done,” grows with each act of divine grace. Isaiah’s generation was judged for rejecting the prophets. The rulers of Jesus’ day were judged for rejecting something more, the Son. What about us? Christians have something more that the wicked tenants did not. We have come to initial faith in Christ. What greater privilege is there than to be enlightened, to taste the heavenly gift, to share in the Holy Spirit, to taste the

goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come (Heb 6:4f)? What more could God do than He has already done for those who have believed? Remember Hebrews 10:26–31:

[I]f we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.... How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.” It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

The vineyard will always be taken from wicked tenants and given to those who bear the fruit of Calvary’s tree. The parable is for us.

What will the judgment look like for us? We may see our local church riddled with division, filled with people who are weak, ill, and dying (1 Cor 11:30). Eventually, our local church may have its lampstand removed (Rev 2:5). We may see the decline of Christianity in the West, and the rise of vibrant, fruit-bearing churches in Africa and Asia. According to Matthew 21:40, judgment comes “when the owner of the vineyard comes.” Scripture has many names for this kind of time in history. It is the “time of visitation” (Luke 19:44).⁵⁹ It is “the day of the Lord.”⁶⁰ There have been many such days for rebellious peoples in human history. The destruction of 70 AD was one of those days, but it was not the last. I do not know how many more are yet to come or what judgments may unfold throughout history. In the end, there will be one final judgment (2 Thes 1:7–10):

when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that

⁵⁹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina 3 (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 2006), 305.

⁶⁰ A. Joseph Everson, “Days of Yahweh,” *JBL* 93 (1974): 329–37.

day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

What Will You Do?

The final judgment has not yet come upon us. God sends prophets and righteous men to His vineyard. What does it look like today when God seeks fruit from us? It may look like a new convert from a colorful background bringing in visitors who don't know the rules, and who come with all sorts of baggage and uncomfortable questions. It may be a new preacher talking about stuff that we just don't talk about here. It may look like a newly appointed eldership. Instead of doing all the work and staying out of your business, they get in your business and try to equip you to do the work. It may look like a woman who has been a Christian for some time realizing that she has been focusing on what she gets from Christianity, clocking in for the ticket to heaven, but not bearing fruit for others. She exhorts the church to join her in getting serious. It may look like an older sister in Christ, saying what she has been saying all along, doing what she has been doing all along, but for some reason, only now do you feel personally convicted by her example. Always, this challenge comes to us in the gospel (Col 1:5f): "Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth." When Jesus comes to you looking for fruit, what will you do? Will you receive the righteous men and women? The destruction of Jerusalem and the cross of Christ are two defining patterns. Which will you follow? Will you hold on to power until it is taken from you, or will you sacrifice and be vindicated by the Almighty?

My tone in this lesson may be negative. It may sound accusatory. If it does, this is by design. This is the tone of the text that I was assigned. I have tried to make the tone of the text the tone of my lecture. The truth is, I do not know you all. I think that, for the most part, in our religious heritage, the fact that you are reading

this suggests that you are the privileged. With respect to those who claim to be members of “churches of Christ,” to be “sound,” you are the insiders, the people with power, the people with influence. You are preachers, elders, and the kinds of Christians who have the money and freedom to attend lectures, to buy lecture books, and to move in social networks like this. But I do not know which of you are bearing the fruit and which of you are not. I do know this: when Jesus first spoke this parable, it was one of the few parables where those who heard it understood that he was talking about them. I suspect there may be some reading this manuscript who have been blessed, but who have hoarded the blessings for themselves, and have not produced the fruit. Some of you may be territorial, more interested in playing church politics than in coming to truth. There may be some who reflect on the parable and know that Jesus is speaking of them. Perhaps, even in reading these words, a bitterness, a defensiveness, has arisen in you. Do not share in the rebellion of those who understand, but do not repent. Turn or you will share in their judgment. If you do not repent, what will the owner of the vineyard do?

“[I]t is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.” (Phil 1:9–11)

Be on the Alert: Watching for the King

The Parables of the Wise and Foolish Virgins, the Wise and Foolish Servants, and the Talents (and Minas)

Jeremy N. Sweets

Be Prepared! Stay Alert! On Guard! Be Ready! These common instructions are uttered today by Boy Scout leaders, military commanders, fencing participants, and discerning fathers. Yet, never have they borne more significance than when Jesus spoke them in his final discourse in Matthew's Gospel. He warned his disciples to be prepared for the coming Day of Judgment. This is what he wanted to leave with his disciples as a matter of supreme importance before he went to the cross. Eternity was on the line, and he did not want his disciples to be unprepared for it.

This lecture will consider the theme of readiness as presented in the three-part parable cluster found in Matthew 24:45–25:30 and its parallel accounts. These well-known parables consist of the Faithful and Unfaithful Servant (Matt 24:45–51; Mark 13:32–37; Luke 12:41–48), the Foolish and Wise Virgins (Matt. 25:1–13 with a partial parallel in Luke 12:35–40), and the Talents or Minas (Matt 25:14–30; Luke 19:11–27). Jesus was the master teacher, and he used these rich, engaging parables to instruct, encourage and lead his hearers to action.

The Context

As many sermons and Bible studies have profitably done, it is possible to consider these parables as isolated, stand-alone teaching. They clearly form a unit, however, and their impact is heightened when considered together and within the broader discourse of Jesus' words on the destruction of Jerusalem and the end times as recorded in Matthew 24–25. Mark 13 and Luke 21 provide parallel accounts of Jesus' discussion of the destruction of Jerusalem, but Mark only briefly transitions to the Second Coming of Christ and Luke appears to have bypassed the discussion altogether. It is Matthew's Gospel that expands upon this theme the most, and he uses parables to relay these important teachings.

Matthew's Gospel is structured around five separate discourses, which are indicated in the text with the concluding formula, "when Jesus had finished these words" (or some slight variation; Matt 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1).¹ The parables under consideration are found in the final discourse of Matthew 24–25 when Jesus foretells future events as he looks upon the temple with his disciples. The discourse opens with Jesus predicting that the temple will be overthrown with not a single stone left upon another (24:1f). This prompts the disciples to ask *when* will these things be and *what sign* will accompany "your coming and the end of the age" (24:3).² The disciples include these events with the end of the age, apparently thinking that they will come at the same time.³ Jesus' response to their question becomes the subject of this discourse (24:4–25:46).

There is no doubt that the discourse of Matthew 24–25 is a difficult passage. It seems clear that Jesus addresses the disciples'

¹Quotations are taken from the ESV Bible.

²Only Matthew records the additional part about "the end of the age" within the question of the disciples (Matt 24:3; Mark 13:4; Luke 21:7). This addition anticipates Jesus' extended discussion about the Final Judgment, which receives special treatment in Matthew.

³It makes sense that the disciples would conflate these events. The disciples anticipated the Kingdom of God to come soon in a physical restoration and manifestation of God's reign on earth (see Luke 19:11; Acts 1:6). The destruction of the temple would have been unimaginable under normal circumstances but conceivable with the events anticipated with the coming Kingdom of God.

question and speaks on the subject of judgment, both upon Jerusalem and the final judgment. What becomes less clear is distinguishing which judgment Jesus is referencing throughout his discourse. This is especially true since the announcement of judgment can be found repeatedly throughout the Old and New Testaments with similar themes and concerns. The final judgment is just that, a final and consummating judgment that has been prefigured by many prior judgments to a smaller degree. In other words, they do not differ in kind, only in scale. Much of what could be said about one judgment could be said about the other.

For all their similarities, Jesus does make one absolute distinction between the two judgments, which provides the structural framework for this passage.⁴ While he enumerated observable and discernable signs for the coming destruction of Jerusalem (24:4–35), the final judgment will come without any warning. The hinge passage comes in Matthew 24:36 as Jesus makes a transition to the uncertain timing of the final judgment: “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.”⁵

The section of Matthew 24:36–44 advances the thesis statement while introducing an important exhortation for the hearers. The coming of the Son of Man is compared to the coming of the flood in the days of Noah (vv 36–39), the suddenness of being taken while working (vv 40f), and the unknown arrival of a thief at

⁴For a helpful treatment of the arrangement of Matthew 24, see R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 889–96.

⁵The theme of signs vs. the unknowable day is the best indicator of the transition in this passage. Yet, there are still many ambiguities in the passage, which contribute to its difficulty. Matthew 24:29–31 has a finality to it that sounds more like the final judgment and Matthew 24:40f talks about one being left, which sounds more like the destruction of Jerusalem. The use of the common theme of judgment can create some ambiguous references while figurative language and extended metaphors are used to make a point and do not require assigned significance for every detail of the illustration. Also, Luke 17:20–37, while not a parallel to the setting of Matthew 24, uses some parallel illustrations and teaching that can be found on both sides of the Matthew 24:36 “divider,” thus prompting some interpreters to believe that all of Matthew 24 tells of the destruction of Jerusalem. See, for example, Homer Hailey, “Matthew 24,” *The Preceptor* 13 (1964). However, it should be noted that parallel passages in the Gospels do not equate to parallel purposes by the Gospel writers. The same words and illustrations could be used for slightly different points.

night (v 43). Embedded within these examples are two “therefore” statements that connect Jesus’ illustrations with the main point. Since the day of the Lord’s coming cannot be known or expected, you must “therefore, stay awake” (v 42) and “be ready” (v 44).

With this theme clearly established, Matthew records the parable cluster that stresses the need for readiness in the face of judgment (24:45–25:30) before concluding with a picture of the final judgment scene (25:31–46). The “readiness” parables⁶ are arranged in a three-fold A-B-A chiastic structure. The parable of the maidens at the wedding feast is sandwiched between the two parables about stewards. Matthew uses repetition for emphasis and makes the point hard to miss.⁷

Before discussing the details of each parable, it may be helpful to note some of their common features. Each of these parables can be classified as a triad or a parable involving three main characters.⁸ Some have identified this type of parable as a “monarchic parable” since the character structure consists of a single authority figure who stands over subservient individuals or groups.⁹ The subservient characters include good and bad examples, both of whom must give an account to the one in authority. The subservient characters present polar expressions of behavior and face very different consequences.¹⁰

The readiness parables also display a similar plot carried out by the three main characters. In each case, the master is absent for a period of time before making a return. The subordinates have a responsibility in the interim, and they are held accountable upon the

⁶ As a shorthand, these parables and their parallels may be referenced as readiness parables.

⁷ Matthew has a propensity for arranging his material in groups of three; see “The Structure of Matthew” in W. D. Davies and Dale Allison, Jr., *Matthew, Vol. 1*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2004), 58–72. The repetition and chiastic structure also reveal a clear influence from Hebrew literature.

⁸ Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 198–99.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Triad structures are common in the parables of Jesus, with such notable examples as the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32), the Two Sons (Matt. 21:28–32), and the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37).

master's return. The repeated stories reinforce the point of Matthew 24:44—be ready for the coming of the Son of Man.

One other interpretive question to consider involves the identification of some of the elements within the parable. While allegorizing or assigning meaning to every part of a parable should be avoided, the context often suggests times when it is appropriate to do so.¹¹ In the readiness parables, it seems clear that the authority figure and his departure represents that of Christ. Just as the master of each story was away and returned to call their subjects to account, so will Christ. This connection is made even stronger by repeated phrases related to the unknown timing of the Lord's return, which spans Jesus' direct teaching (24:36, 42, 44) and the parables (24:50; 25:13).

Furthermore, the reward and punishment of the servants is suggestive of heaven and hell, and resembles other final judgment scenes in Matthew. Just as in the Sermon on the Mount, evil servants are cast out and told, "I do not know you" (Matt 7:21–23; 25:12). The casting out into "outer darkness" and "weeping and gnashing of teeth" are commonly found in the parables as depictions of final judgment (Matt 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30). In the immediate context these parables introduce the final judgment scene of Matthew 25:31–46 where "eternal life" and "eternal punishment" are at stake (25:46). Additionally, the imagery of the Great Banquet Feast was a known image of the eschaton and used elsewhere in the parables.¹²

The Parable of the Faithful and Unfaithful Steward

The opening parable is probably the least known of the cluster, cordoned off by the chapter division, beginning with a non-standard opening, and being the shortest and simplest parable of the three. Nevertheless, it serves the important role of establishing the

¹¹ See Blomberg's discussion of "Parable and Allegory;" Blomberg, *Interpreting the parables*, 33–81. The readiness parables have been particularly susceptible to the discussion of allegory since they deal with the end times, a subject which is filled with metaphor and imagery in Scripture.

¹² See the parable of the Wedding Feast in Luke 14:7–14 and the parable of the Great Banquet in Matthew 22:1–14 and Luke 14:15–24. Another allusion to the banquet feast may be found in Luke 13:28 where the righteous from the four corners of the world will "recline at table in the kingdom of God."

basic structure of the parables and introducing their themes.¹³ This parable consists of two sections: the faithful and wise servant (vv 45–47) and the unfaithful servant (vv 48–51). In a slight twist for a triad parable, the good and evil servant is not presented by two separate individuals but the same person who has the potential to go in two different directions.

Jesus begins the parable with a question that both introduces the basic plot of the story and calls upon his hearers to consider their answer. “Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time?” (v 45). This servant, whom Luke identifies as a steward (Luke 2:42), would have been an individual entrusted with providing food and rations to the other slaves at the proper time. A servant entrusted with the well-being of the other slaves would have had the full confidence of his master. Stewards were regularly employed in the Roman world by wealthy businessmen who used slaves or freedmen in the tasks needed for running their business. It was also common for businessmen to travel for long periods of time to pursue business ventures or check on other holdings. Methods of travel were unreliable and subject to uncontrollable circumstances like the weather, which meant that the exact time when the master would return was unknown or could be delayed.

The servant in the parable has two potential courses of action, and the determining factor is his mindset about the master’s return. The faithful and wise servant consistently completes his task, so that the timing of the master’s return makes no difference. Whenever he returns, he will find the servant faithfully fulfilling his duties. Jesus plays out another hypothetical situation if that servant tells himself that his master is delayed. By dismissing the return of his master, and thus his own accountability, he shirks his responsibility and engages in gross misconduct. Instead of providing care to his fellow-servants, he abuses them. Instead of giving them provisions, he gorges himself to the point of drunkenness.

¹³ As an introduction to the following material, this parable resembles Psalm 1, which serves as an introduction for the Psalter. Both have two paths, a good and evil way, that lead in different directions with different consequences. Both passages also include a beatitude for the righteous.

The consequences of each course are quickly apparent. The faithful servant is blessed and allotted ever greater responsibility by his master. The evil servant, on the other hand, is cut in two and placed with the hypocrites.¹⁴ The severity of the punishment would have been startling for its original hearers, as it is today. To be cut in pieces is a gruesome end, and while such savagery was not unknown in the Roman world, it would have been an uncommon punishment for a neglectful slave. The reference to weeping and gnashing of teeth in v 51 signifies the effects upon the tormented soul and points beyond physical death to eternal punishment.

Two other readiness parables can be found that relate to the Faithful and Unfaithful Steward of Matthew 24:45–51. The parable of the Doorkeeper in Mark 13:32–37 appears within the same setting of Jesus’ judgment discourse. Like Matthew 24 it concludes with a transition to “that day” of the Second Coming (Matt 24:36; Mark 13:32). This parable relays a similar plot of a man who departs on a long journey and entrusts his servants with individual tasks. The servant who receives the attention of the parable is the doorkeeper, who must be alert and watchful for his master’s return. Even more so than the faithful steward of Matthew 24, the doorkeeper’s primary task is to watch for the master’s return.

This short parable efficiently tackles the two main themes of the unknown return and the need for readiness. Three times the passage refers to the fact that no one knows the time of the return (Mark 13:32, 33, 35). It could come at any time, including “the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning” (Mark 13:35) and “suddenly” catch the unsuspecting off guard. The admonition to “keep awake” completely occupies these few verses with three different words for alertness used a total of five times (Mark 13:33 twice, 34, 35, 37).

The parallel passage found in Luke 12:41–48 contains a true parallel to Matthew’s account with minor differences between them, but it is presented in a different context from Jesus’ judg-

¹⁴Placement with the hypocrites may recall the woes that Jesus announced upon the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23. Hypocrites are double-minded people, and a splitting is a fitting punishment for the crime.

ment discourse. It occurs in the middle of Luke's lengthy account of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem in Luke 9:51–19:48. Luke's parable is used to make a similar point about the need for faithful stewardship. The parable is introduced by Peter's question about whether Jesus' teaching was for the disciples or the extended crowd (12:41). Jesus conspicuously leaves the question hanging in the air without providing a direct answer. The parable suggests, though, that there is a universal need for being alert to the masters return.

The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Maidens

The next parable relates the story of the ten virgins or maidens waiting for the bridegroom to return for the marriage feast, and it is only found in Matthew's gospel.

Weddings are an integral part of every society, and it would provide a familiar setting for Jesus' contemporaries. Once again, this parable establishes two courses of action to take while waiting for the bridegroom. Wisdom demands readiness and preparation for the bridegroom's return at any time. Folly fails to make such preparations. The closing admonition repeats the common refrain, "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour" (25:13).

Although weddings are common to every culture, the customs associated with them differ according to time and place. Ancient Jewish marriage customs involved two component parts: the betrothal and the wedding ceremony.¹⁵ The betrothal was a binding contract, often arranged by the parents, that changed the legal status of the bride and groom from being single to a couple. The groom demonstrated his commitment through a gift to the bride or to her father. By accepting the gift, the woman would become consecrated to her husband.

The second part of the marriage was the wedding ceremony, which would have been followed by night-time processions and a celebratory feast.¹⁶ The ceremony consisted of public an-

¹⁵R. Posner, "Marriage," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., ed. Fred Skolnik (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Ltd., 2007), 13:565.

¹⁶Wedding processions are found in Scripture in Psalm 45:13–15 and the Apocrypha in 1 Maccabees 9:37–39. For a description of the wedding feast, see Joachim

nouncements of commitment and divine blessings before family and friends. The day would have been filled with dancing or other entertainment.¹⁷ At night, the celebration would transition to the home of the groom's parents, where the bride and groom would meet under the bridal canopy before attending the wedding feast with friends and family.¹⁸

One of the highlights of the night was the festal processional to the wedding feast. The bride and groom were accompanied by their attendants, who carried torches to light up the nighttime. In the parable of the ten maidens, female attendants are waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom. It is likely that they had already accompanied the bride to the groom's house and are waiting for the arrival of the groom to take him to his bride. In some traditions, the bride was accompanied first while the groom stayed behind and negotiated presents for the bride's family. Once the bargaining was completed, the groom would make his own processional to his parent's house, where his arrival was anticipated and announced upon his coming. A prolonged bargaining process, common in Palestine, would have led to potential delays and the uncertain timing of the bridegroom's return.

The parable is framed by an introduction (v 1) and conclusion (v 13), and it includes the typical elements of a storyline with a plot (vv 2–5), climax (v 6), and resolution (vv 7–12). Matthew begins with a familiar refrain, likening the kingdom of heaven to the unfolding parable. This ordinary story is used to reveal the true nature of the Kingdom of God. The two character groups of the ten maidens and the bridegroom are introduced in the opening line, but the next verse divides the ten maidens into five wise and five foolish, creating the three-character triad parable.

The plot of the parable revolves around their use of lamps or torches for the groom's festal procession. The wise maidens take

Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 3rd rev. ed., trans. S. Hooke (London: SCM Press, 1972), 171–74.

¹⁷ See Matthew 9:15 as a reference to the presence of the bridegroom as a time of joy and celebration.

¹⁸ The parables of the Wedding Feast (Matt 22:1–14) and the Great Banquet (Luke 14:16–24) show the wedding feast taking place at the home of the groom's parents.

extra oil with them, while the foolish ones take none. Although some make an argument for the lamp as a clay or metal vessel with a wick, it is more likely to be a torch in this context.¹⁹ Torches would have consisted of some type of linen rag wrapped around the top of a wooden stick and dipped in olive oil. “Trimming the lamps” (v 7) involved tearing away the used rags from the torch, affixing another rag and dipping it in the oil for lighting.

When the bridegroom finally comes, the wise maidens are prepared, while the foolish maidens are helpless in the face of their shortsightedness. They beg their wise companions to share their oil, but there is not enough for both of them. The unprepared maidens scramble to a dealer to buy oil, but the bridegroom comes while they were away. The consequences for the foolish maidens would have been devastating. While the prepared attendants enter the wedding feast, they are shut out from the festivities and denounced as strangers. Their cries for entry are met with the cold reply, “I do not know you” (vv 11f).

While there is no direct parallel to this parable, Luke does record a readiness parable in Luke 12:35–40 with a wedding setting reminiscent of this parable. The passage opens with a three-fold instruction that emphasizes the need for readiness. 1) Stay dressed for action, 2) keep your lamps burning, and 3) be like the servants who open the door for the master returning from the wedding feast. Typical dress in Palestine involved long-flowing robes. Being “dressed for action” or “girding your loins” involved gathering the robe and tying it around one’s waist for increased mobility. This type of dress allowed an individual to freely move about and be ready for action. Burning lamps would have conveyed watchfulness at night, and the parable further elaborates on the need for readiness.

On most points Luke’s parable resembles the other readiness parables, but this one adds a shocking twist when describing the outcome. As expected, the servants are blessed when the master finds them awake (note the corresponding beatitude in Luke 4:43).

¹⁹ See discussion of the lamps as torches in Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 172–73.

Jesus then states that the master would dress himself for action and serve the servants. The master adopts the characteristics of the servants, and the servants are elevated because of their service. This stunning behavior would have been shocking and totally unexpected. Yet, this reversal became the foundation for Jesus' earthly life and ministry. He demonstrated this reversal when he washed the disciples' feet, and ultimately when he gave his life as a ransom for many (John 13:1–20; Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45).

The Parable of the Talents

The final readiness parable in Matthew's trio is the Parable of the Talents. Like the first parable, it involves a master who departs on a journey and leaves his servants behind with responsibilities. This time, the servants serve as stewards of the master's substantial wealth. They are each given a sum of money with the expectation of increasing his financial capital while he is away. This was not an uncommon request in the Roman Empire as wealthy businessmen often departed on long journeys and used servants in this capacity.

The parable can be divided into three sections consisting of the distribution of money (vv 14f), the action of the stewards (vv 16–18), and the reckoning upon the master's return (vv 19–30).²⁰ The use of an additional subordinate character seems to deviate from the pattern, but upon closer inspection the first two stewards act in a similar fashion and serve the same function of the good servant. For this reason, the parable could still be identified as a triad, or three-character parable, consisting of an authority figure, good servants and an evil servant.

Each servant is given a different number of talents according to his ability. Today, a talent refers to a person's innate skills or abilities, but that is not the meaning in this passage. The Greek word for talent was a gold, silver, or copper "unit of coinage" equivalent to about 6,000 denarii or 20 years of wages for the average day-laborer.²¹ All of the servants, even the man given a single talent, were

²⁰ Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 523.

²¹ William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon*

dealing with a tremendous amount of money. That a talent refers to money and not a person's ability must be kept in mind to avoid misunderstanding and misapplication.

The action, or lack thereof, of the servants is what sets them apart. The first servant takes immediate action. The man with five talents "went at once" to trade, and he doubles his profits. The second servant did the same thing with the same result. Their eagerness to get to work means they would have been prepared whenever the master returned. The third servant goes and hides his talent, opting instead to do nothing with his master's money.

The lengthiest part of the parable is the reckoning, which comprises nearly two-thirds of the verse count (11 out of 17). V 19 introduces this section with the master's return after a long time to "settle accounts." The first two servants step forward, one after the other. They present their doubled earnings with the same zeal they had when completing their task. The master is pleased with both of them, commending their job and assigning them additional responsibilities. He calls them "good and faithful" while welcoming them into "the joy of your master." The twofold repetition of the master's commendation provides emphasis and stands in total contrast with the third servant.

The third servant approaches next, stating his motivation before addressing the results of his labor. He calls his master a "hard man" who reaps where he does not sow and gathers where he puts no seed. For this reason, the man confesses his fear and reveals his plan to hide his talent in the ground. After this explanation, the servant seems pleased with himself to present the talent back to his master. At least he did not lose it. His placement of the talent in the ground coincides with the references to sowing and seed. When he presents his talent he may have thought he was allowing the master to "gather where he put no seed." The problem is that he does not yield any harvested fruit. He is only returning the seed.

The master's response to the third servant is found in vv 26–30, where his displeasure is plainly seen. He declares him to be

a “wicked and slothful servant.” His inactivity cannot be excused, and his fear had prevented him from the work he needed to do. The master would have fared better if he had placed his money with bankers to receive interest.

The third servant faces two related consequences for his action. First, his lone talent is taken from him and given to the one with ten talents. His failure to act faithfully meant he would be stripped of all assignments and no longer be entrusted as a steward. The servant’s sentence is followed by a general statement, “For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away” (Matt 25:29). Some have twisted this statement into some type of economic principle that favors the wealthy, but that application diverges from the context. Jesus was instead commending faithful workers *in the kingdom*. Jesus is commending faithful service, not the accumulation of money.

Second, the servant is cast “into outer darkness.” Without a service to offer the master, he is no longer tolerated in his presence. Outer darkness is a place of torment where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. This reference connects with the first parable on stewardship and relates to the judgment scene in the next section where the wicked are cast into “eternal punishment” (v 46).

The parallel Parable of the Minas in Luke 19:12–27 contains the same basic plot but quite a bit of variance. The master is a nobleman who departs to receive a kingdom for himself. There are ten servants instead of three, although only three have accounts settled. Minas are granted instead of talents, which is a smaller amount of money, worth 100 drachmas or days of wages for the common laborer.²² There is also an additional side plot of rebellious citizens who do not want the noble to reign over them and are sentenced to death at the end of the parable. These rebellious citizens have no direct bearing on the main plot and may relate in some way to those who rejected Jesus. With all the differences, the servants are still held accountable for how they handle the master’s money while he is away, yielding the same basic message.

²²BDAG, 654.

The parable's setting is not Jesus' final discourse, recorded in Luke 21:5–36, but it was spoken as they approached Jerusalem “and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately” (Luke 19:11). Considering the context of Luke's parable is instructive. First, the parable is preceded by the account of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–10), and Jesus' announcement of salvation coming to his house “today” may contribute to the disciples' expectation of an immediate appearance of the king. The Parable of the Minas instructs the disciples that the kingdom would not come immediately, but would be preceded by Christ's departure and their service. Second, the material that follows this parable includes the triumphal entry, mourning over Jerusalem, and driving out the temple vendors (Luke 19:28–48). The noble's rejection is likely a picture of the Jews' rejection of Christ. Third, the context reinforces the lesson to be learned from the Parables of the Talents and Minas. In stories like the rich, young ruler (Luke 18:18–30), the blind beggars (18:35–43), Zacchaeus (19:1–10), and the condemnation of the sellers in the temple (19:45f) righteousness is commonly found among the poor, and faithful service is routinely prioritized over wealth. Jesus is not extoling the virtue of physical wealth but spiritual service.

Jesus' Message for Today

Part of what has made these parables so beloved among Christians is their simple, straightforward message and their timely relevance to every generation. Jesus is coming again, and all Christians in all places and times must prepare for it. This message is just as vital today as when it was first spoken. Even though 2,100 years separate us from the original hearers of this message, we still have the same expectation and responsibility. Until Jesus comes again, we must remain vigilant and prepared. With that in mind, consider some ways that these parables speak to us today.

First, be *watchful* and *alert*. As disciples, we can never lose sight of our Master's return. It is not a return that can be scheduled or planned. On five occasions Jesus echoes the refrain that the day and hour of his return can neither be known nor expected (Matt

24:36, 42, 44, 50; 25:13). It will come like a thief in the night, striking without warning. All those who have predicted the date of his return have failed miserably. Predictions are dangerous because they discount Scripture and can disrupt faith when they fail. Yet, it is just as dangerous to dismiss or discount his return. We must work with the same sense of urgency *as if* Christ is coming soon. Our watchfulness and preparation should not be exceeded by those who think they know when he will return.

The danger of discounting Christ's return is amplified with the passing of time. While we may sometimes sing "It won't be very long," from an individual's vantage point, it has been a long time, and it may be a long time yet.²³ With Jesus' departure spanning into a third millennium, these parables provide a powerful message for us, who are so far removed from Christ's departure. The Parable of the Talents states that the master returned "after a long time" (25:19), and the first two parables make specific mention of the "delay" of the master's return (24:48; 25:5).

The problem with a long delay is that many people deny his coming or fall into complacency about it. It was when the unfaithful steward acknowledged the delay and discounted his return that he plunged into self-indulgence rather than service (Matt 24:48–50). Even in the first century, scoffers pointed to the delay of God's promise as evidence that he would not come again (2 Pet 3:3f). The threat is no less real today. A large segment of the scientific and academic community deny God in our past and future, and many have adopted their "expert" testimony with little to no resistance. While we may not deny the Lord's return, Christians can easily be lulled into complacency. We must be ever vigilant and watchful like the doorkeeper. We must have the excited anticipation of the wedding attendants. Let us echo the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 16:22. Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!

Second, be *faithful* in service. The readiness parables encourage us to consider faithful service by showcasing both good and bad examples. When it comes to unfaithful service, the readiness

²³Morgan Williams, "It Won't Be Very Long," arranged by E. M. Bartlett (Stamps-Baxter 1928).

parables all show unprepared individuals, but their actions show different ways this can take place. The unfaithful steward in the first parable turned to outright insubordination and indulgence. He was a polar expression of his master's wishes, gorging on the provisions while ignoring his fellow servants. The foolish virgins illustrated a lack of preparation by being inattentive. They gave no forethought at all to their master's possible delay, and thus they had no provisions to carry out their job. Finally, the wicked one-talent man pursued inactivity. Out of fear and cowardice, he did nothing. He seemed to take pride in not losing the money given to him, but the master expected more than inactivity. He wanted to see fruit from his labor.

Insubordination, inattentiveness and inactivity are all pictures of being ill-prepared for the Master's return. Insubordination and indulgence occur today when people pursue sin. When we focus on ourselves and fulfilling our own desires, we lose sight of the Master's return. Inattentiveness strikes when people are distracted by the many affairs of life. Like seed among the thorns, the "cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word" (Matt 13:22). These cares may be innocent, but they can be dangerous if they cause us to forget about our service to our master. Inactivity can also plague the Lord's people. It is not enough to just avoid sin. Doing nothing will displease our Father and leave us lacking on the Day of Judgment. For this reason, let us be active workers in the Kingdom, not passive spectators.

Good examples of service can also be found in each parable. They all illustrate faithful service, and the nuances between the parables provides a richer, fuller picture. The faithful servant pleased his master through faithful, consistent service. He did what was asked of him. He did not complete some extraordinary feat or display superhuman power. Instead, he faithfully completed his ordinary task on a regular basis. Likewise, God is not calling us to extraordinary service but to faithful and consistent service. Do what is good and right on a daily basis. Be busy in the Lord's work. Create habits that will foster your relationship with God and others.

The wise maidens exhibited foresight, and they made preparations accordingly. They looked beyond their present circumstances to consider the future and what was needed. Faithful Christians must have the same kind of long-term vision. They cannot chase the “fleeting pleasures of sin” (Heb 11:25) or be discouraged by “light momentary affliction” (2 Cor 4:17). They must focus on the Lord’s return and the eternal implications it brings. The men granted two and five talents also teach us something about service. They wasted no time in getting to work. They went to work immediately upon the master’s departure. They took advantage of the time they were given. Faithful Christians today will imitate their example, “making the best use of the time” (Eph 5:17) to serve the master.

Finally, be *motivated*. These parables provide vivid pictures of what awaits the wise and unwise servants. Knowing the consequences of our actions provides ample motivation for us to pursue the godly path. The wicked servants all met a horrifying end. Each one of them was cast out from the presence of his master. Additional descriptions for this punishment include “outer darkness” and a place of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (24:51; 25:30). The images point to an “eternal punishment” of hell, and it is a reality that all wicked must face (25:46). The worst part about hell is that God is not there, and the wicked will “suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord” (2 Thes 1:8f). All those who pursue the course of the foolish and unprepared servants are, in effect, acting like Jonah and fleeing from the presence of the Lord (John 1:3f). Avoiding hell is a great motivating factor today.

The destination of the wise and faithful servants was much different. They were welcomed into their master’s company and given even greater responsibility. The wise maidens joined the wedding feast with the bridegroom. The resourceful stewards with the talents were commended for their service and welcomed to be with their master. “Well done, good and faithful servant... Enter into the joy of your master” (25:21, 23). What a grand and glorious thought that through our faithful service, we could delight our master and

enter into his presence forever. Eternal life with the Father, Son and Spirit is the ultimate motivating factor for the Christian.

Christ will most certainly come again to call us all to account. Let us be alert and ready for his coming, and may we all be found faithful in his service so that we, too, may enter into the presence and joy of our Master.

Rich Toward God: Using Wealth Faithfully for the King

The Parables of the Rich Fool and the Unrighteous Steward

Norm Webb, Jr.

The Teacher was explaining some of the greatest heavenly themes a human could hear: the importance of a sincere heart, your value to your heavenly Father, your loyalty to God and His loyalty to you. Then a hand rises in the back. Teachers get excited when they see that. It typically indicates that the student is engaged, expressing interest, seeking application, asking deeper questions, but not this time. “Teacher,” the man said, “tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” There is an emoji that displays a person with his hand on his forehead. It is called a face palm and I suspect that if Jesus sent a text today, it would be the emoji he might use in this scene. Few questions could have been more selfish, more divisive, more disrupting, more derailing to the conversation. After He spoke of the advocacy of the Holy Spirit, what would Jesus have said next had it not been for this man’s self-absorbed demand? Nevertheless, He takes the question in stride and launches into the greatest lesson ever given on money and souls. Maybe this man should be thanked for providing the impetus for the sermon.

The scene paints a microcosm of our world and culture. How often does money and possessions dominate the landscape of our

lives, hold the attention of our minds, consume our hearts, divide our relationships and dismantle our faith? It manages to weave itself into almost everything. Money and possessions are not, of themselves, sinful. The buying and selling and exchanging of goods and currency are just part of life. Jesus talked about money often, not only to expound upon the principles of its value and management in relation to eternity, but to illustrate many other heavenly principles. Finances are just impossible to avoid, however, much like the man who demands the Master's attention to address his money woes, they too often can become the focal point of our lives and a fatal distraction from eternity. People fail to absorb the greater spiritual messages of Jesus, because their hearts are too focused on what is now, instead of what is to come and therefore, significantly devalue themselves and the souls around them. To God it must be disappointing, maybe even shocking, to see His pinnacle creation and especially His children, think so little of themselves and be so willing to exchange eternity for nickels.

During the summer, when my father was a boy, the ice cream truck would come around his neighborhood. My grandfather would kneel down next to Dad, hold up two coins and ask him, "Do you want to get something with this great big nickel or with this little bitty dime?" Having not yet been taught the value of one over the other, he naturally would choose the bigger coin. How often are we so easily fooled by the Devil's deception, because we fail to grasp the value of what God has to offer?

As well, not unlike Jesus' distracted student, our culture wants Jesus to stamp the lusts for wealth, possessions and entertainment with divine approval: "Tell my brother...!" In modern vernacular it would sound more like, "Don't I have rights to it? Why should everyone else get what they want and not me?" The sense of entitlement has grown rabid today, infesting our culture, politics and laws. It has begun to erode the concepts of hard work, patience and self-discipline. It is to this deception that Jesus often warned His audiences and provided his hearers with parables to help them raise their eyes beyond wealth and possessions and see greater treasures with visions of faith.

As previously mentioned, Jesus talked much about money. Sometimes it was in conversations with people like Zacchaeus, with the rich young ruler, or with the Pharisees over taxes and traditions and tithing. He chose Matthew, a tax-collector, as an apostle, but ironically had Judas manage the money. Money was an everyday part of Jesus' life and the lives of his followers and enemies. Like today, it was impossible to be untouched by money. It is now and was then intricately woven into the life of every individual. Jesus never described money as good or bad. Money is neutral and a tool that can be used for great good (Acts 4:36f) or horrific evil (Matt 26:14–16). Therefore, Jesus used money in many of his parables to illustrate, literally “lay alongside of,” heavenly principles. Some, like the parables of the Pearl of Great Price, Treasure Found in a Field, Distribution of Talents, and the Indebted Servants, describe the value of the kingdom or godly virtues that should be embraced and lived by kingdom citizens. Other parables, however, directly address how disciples should think and handle their wealth or lack thereof. This lecture will specifically address two of those parables, their cultural and textual context, their meanings to that original audience and finally principles and practical applications to 21st-century disciples.

The Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:13–21)

As we return to the beginning of Luke 12, Jesus is addressing some significant spiritual lessons when He is interrupted by a man whose mind is obviously more focused on the earthly than on Jesus' heavenly revelations. It seems that this man's father has passed. While the text does not specifically acknowledge this man's family position, the cultural norm of the eldest son receiving the bulk of the inheritance provides the probable scenario that this man is a younger brother and desires a portion of his father's estate. It is possible that the father has not left a will, which means that the decision to divide the estate is in the hands of the eldest son. This man is not concerned about his relationship with his brother, nor is he seeking Jesus' advice, rather he demands from the Son of God to grant approval to his pre-determined jus-

tice and grant his alleged rights. Jesus immediately dismisses his involvement in the matter by making it clear that he is in no civil position to rule in this matter. While He is the Son of God and Messiah, he is not the arbitrator or judge to provide a legal ruling on this issue. This was not the purpose for which he had come. Rather, Jesus focuses on the real source of division between this man and his brother, which was greed.

Jesus' answer to the man is not a judgment, but two principles that bookend a parable to address this man's real problem. He opens with, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions," and closes with, "So is the man who stores up treasures for himself and is not rich toward God." Sandwiched between these two is a parable that illustrates both of them.

Jesus relates a story about a man who is already rich, receives a bumper crop and has a problem. "What shall I do since I have no place to store my crops" (Luke 12:17)? The problem with the rich man is not that he is rich, nor that he has had an abundant harvest. The scriptures reveal numerous wealthy individuals who were considered by God to be faithful. Job, considered blameless in his generation, and Abraham, called a friend of God, were both blessed by God and wealthy. Matthew indicates that Jesus felt a love for the rich young ruler (12:21). The rich man's sin was not being wealthy. His problem was how he viewed his wealth and what he chooses to do with it.

The rich man continues the dialogue with himself and the first person pronouns abound in this single sided conversation. He talks about what he is going to do with his crops, his barns and his soul. This manifests two issues. The first is that he seems to have no one with whom to have this conversation except himself. Bailey observes, "In the Middle East, village people make decisions about important topics after long discussions with their friends."¹ This man seemed to have no use for others and thought highly of his own advice, but even worse, he gives no consider-

¹ Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 303.

ation to the One who had blessed him so richly. His relationship with God finds no place in His thinking or decision.

Often, a person's mistake with money management does not derive from ignorance, but an unwillingness to seek objective consultation. Individuals attach a tremendous amount of emotion and feelings to money and possessions that cloud sound judgment, integrity and discipline and thus conclude with poor decision-making and ruining of relationships. A good friend, with an objective perspective may have offered some better alternatives to this rich man. This, however, is not the worst problem.

How different might this story have been if the rich man had sought God and His guidance? Had he done so, he would have been reminded that God owns everything. "For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills...If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine" (Psa 50:9, 11). He would have realized that his crops, his barns, his goods and even his soul are owned by God. That principle, that single realization, completely changes how a person thinks and responds to financial blessings or crisis. Even the most mundane decisions are brought to the King's throne room in prayer: "Lord, should I buy this house, this car, this refrigerator, this blouse, this pair of socks, with your money?" "Lord, someone just ran into your car and it is going to cost a good bit of your money to fix it. What would you have me to do?" When the recognition is made that the individual is just a steward of what God has given, answers like, "do not spend more than you make," and "do not increase debt at 19% interest," become glaringly obvious. A person is quickly reminded that, "The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is the slave of the lender" (Prov 22:7).

This rich man's second mistake was failing to properly weigh the value of his eternal relationship with God against his relationship with temporary material prosperity. But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' (Luke 12:20). There was nothing wrong with this man taking his ease, eating, drinking and being merry. Solomon even encourages this (Eccl 8:15). The rich

man had worked hard and his hard work had paid off, but in the process he had forgotten the rest of what Solomon had written, “Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment” (Eccl 10:9). The rich man had given no attention to his relationship with God, who owned not only all his possessions, but his soul. God was calling in the debt and not all the money in the world could pay it off.

People think so little of themselves. We are first and foremost spirit, eternal in its nature. We are not given a soul. We are a soul, which has a temporary body. Humans are priceless to God, however they devalue themselves by measuring their worth by what they own. This is why Jesus began the parable by saying, “one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions,” and closes with “so is the one who lays up for treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”

The rich man had no treasure laid up in heaven. He was spiritually bankrupt, but believed that his earthly value could somehow fill the vacuum. God uses a different currency from a different bank. Revelation 14:1–13 addresses this well. Those who will stand on Mount Zion with the Lamb will be those who works follow them (v 13). The currency of heaven will be the blood of Jesus that motivates one to put his focus on living morally (v 4), speaking with integrity (v 5), pressing on patiently (v 12) and keeping God’s commandments faithfully (v 12). He rests from his labors because He has died in the Lord. His heart is in heaven because he treasured his relationship with God more than his relationship with material possessions.

As one leaves the structure of the parable, he realizes that Jesus’ audience is not the wealthy of society (Luke 12:22–34). The wealthy do not typically worry about where their next meal will come from or if they will have enough clothes to stay warm. One comes to realize that greed, and anxiety over accumulation of wealth and possessions, is not just a problem of the rich, but of the poor as well. Jesus urges his listeners to “not be anxious about your life...for life is more than food and your body more than clothing” (vv 22f).

A common belief among Jews and Gentiles was that the rich were blessed by God because of their faithfulness to Him. At the close of the account of the rich young ruler, the apostles are amazed that it would be difficult for a rich man to enter into heaven (Mark 10:24). In this parable of the rich fool, Jesus dispels that theory and sets the rich man at odds with God, not because of his wealth, but because of where he put his treasure. Jesus speaks to the rich and poor alike and admonishes them to seek His kingdom, for money and possessions cannot fill the God created void in each of us.

The Parable of the Unrighteous Steward

If God owns it all and if our soul is going to be required of us, what shall we do with the blessings that God has given us? The parable of unrighteous steward in Luke 16:1–8 helps us to answer that question.

While most of Jesus' parables and divine explanations seem clear, there are a few that are challenging to interpret. Such is the case of this parable primarily because of the explanation at the end, as it seems on the surface that Jesus commends an unjust manager and urges his listeners to make friends by means of the wealth of unrighteousness (16:8f). However, some textual and cultural context provides clarity and some powerful application.

Jesus tells of a manager that has squandered the possession of his rich master. The master calls in the manager, asks about his reputation, and requires an accounting of his management after which he will be dismissed from his managerial duties. The manager quickly comes to the realization that if he does not act quickly he will have no means by which to support himself, since he is too weak to dig and too proud to beg. He comes up with a plan that will cause others to welcome him into their homes. To the 21st-century reader this may seem like the manager is looking for a free handout, but it most likely means that he wants to demonstrate that he is hireable. The manager of a person's estate typically lived in the master's home. The question then, is what can he do to prove that he is still trustworthy and be hired by others to manage their affairs?

The arrangement of the rich man was one where he leased his land to others for a certain price, specifically here, to one who grew wheat and another who had an olive grove. One of the primary jobs of the manager was to collect the payment from those using the land, which typically involved a portion of their harvest or product. What was common was for the manager to increase the cost of payment of those leasing the land in order to provide for his own financial needs or desires. Sometimes the increase would be excessive. Those leasing the land usually did not know what the land owner actually charged, and the land owner did not know how much the manager increased the payment. In order to gather the good graces of the leasers, the manager in the parable enables those leasing the land to reduce their payments by removing his commission. Of course to those leasing, this would appear as if the manager was reducing the debt at his own will and risking his position with the owner, while the owner did not actually lose anything, but received the payment he expected. At the end of the parable, one reads that the master praised the manager because he had acted wisely.

Jesus interprets his own parable beginning in Luke 16:8, when He says, “for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light.” So what does Jesus mean and what is the listener supposed to learn? While the manager may have squandered the possessions of his master in the past, his actions now seem to have a trace of ethical value. He forfeited certain monetary profit in the short term in order to gain the good graces of the land leasers and thus provide for himself an opportunity of employment and residency for the long term. For this he is praised by his former employer as wise. This is tied to Jesus’ point that the children of light do not seem to recognize the value of short term sacrifice for long term gain in heavenly things.

Jesus then expounds on this thought and tells his listeners “to make friends for yourselves my means of the wealth of unrighteousness, so that when it fails they will receive you into the eternal dwellings.” The term “wealth of unrighteousness” is sometimes translated “unrighteous mammon.” Mammon is a transliteration from the same Aramaic word and was associated with

a Syrian idol or god that was considered to be the protector of wealth. The word also originally meant “that in which one puts one’s trust.”² Jesus’ use of this word does not indicate that money of itself was evil, but unreliable. Money cannot buy or fix the things that matter the most. Money, in and of itself, cannot make a person happier, fix his marriage, raise his children, heal incurable diseases or enable him to escape death.

So what does Jesus want his listeners to do? To answer this question, it is important to remember who is listening. The textual context goes all the way back to the beginning of Luke 15, where one finds Pharisees, scribes, tax-collectors and sinners. Luke 16:14 indicates that the Pharisees are still in this audience, are lovers of money and scoff what Jesus has to say. In addition, without doubt, the end of the parable of the lost son in Luke 15 is directed toward the Pharisees. The Pharisees put much trust and clout in their financial situation and religious standing and considered themselves elevated above the rest of this crowd. Jesus makes it clear that if his listeners wanted to be received into eternal dwelling places they needed to use their physical blessings in a way to serve others. They needed to sacrifice the short term things that were considered so valuable in order to secure eternal riches.

Maybe this is best seen in the account of Zacchaeus, a rich chief tax collector, in Luke 19, who upon sitting down with Jesus said, “Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much” (19:8).

Paul puts Jesus’ lesson in practical tones when he writes to Timothy to encourage “the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life” (1 Tim 6:17–19).

²David Guzik, *Luke*, Enduring Word: <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/luke-16/>.

In returning to Luke 16:10–12, Jesus explains why this principle is so important to understand, “One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own?” Jesus returns to the concept that his disciples are simply stewards of God’s earthly blessings and if they cannot properly use and manage the small things in this life, like their wealth and possessions, they will never be able to be trusted with eternal riches (Eph 1:3–14).

Finally, Jesus concludes in Luke 16:13, by saying, each individual is going to have to choose whom he will serve. He will either put his trust in Mammon and pursue earthly riches to serve himself or he will use his earthly wealth to serve the one true God by helping others.

Practical Application of Biblical Money Management

To summarize, consider some final applications of divine money management that will help everyone to be faithful in a little, so that God will provide us with the opportunity to be faithful in much. First, realize that your value is not determined by how much you make, but in Whose image you are made (2 Cor 5:1–4; 1 Cor 6:19). Second, remember that everything belongs to God and you are just a manager (Psa 89:11; Jam 1:17). Third, invest in eternal riches (Matt 6:19–21; Rev 14:13). Fourth, pray about your finances (Prov 30:7–9; Phil 4:6). Fifth, learn to be content (Eccl 5:10; Prov 21:20; 22:7). Sixth, save wisely (Prov 21:20; 10:5). Seventh, spend wisely (Prov 13:7), and finally, give generously (1 Tim 6:17–19; Eph 4:28; Prov 11:24f; 28:27).

There Is Still Room: The King's Invitation to the Wedding Feast

The Parables of the Wedding Feast for the King's Son and the Invitation to a Banquet

David Padfield

After the Law of Moses had been read in the hearing of the people, and then sealed with the blood of a lamb, the covenant was celebrated in a meal with Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy of “the nobles of the children of Israel” (Exod 24:9–11).¹ Seventy-four men, representing the nation of Israel, ascended Mount Sinai to partake in a covenant meal with God where “they saw God, and they ate and drank” (Exod 24:11). However, there is no mention in this text of God eating and drinking as a human participant at this meal. God partially revealed Himself to these men so they would know that He was a willing participant to the covenant. As Walter Brueggemann, one of the most influential Old Testament scholars of our day, said, “The narrative intends to leave us stunned, bewildered, and awestruck. And it does! We do not know what happened, for here earth entered into face-to-face contact with the Holy One around the most elemental activity of eating...”² Forty years later, as Israel was about to enter the Promised Land, Moses promised the people that they would “eat before the

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the NJKV.

² Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis-Leviticus*, NIB 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 882.

Lord your God” in the place “where the Lord your God chooses” (Deut 12:5–7). As you continue reading the Old Testament, you find that covenants were often celebrated by a feast (*cf.* Gen 26:28–31; 31:44–54; Josh 9:11–15; 2 Sam 3:20f; Isa 55:1–3).

Nearly a millennium after the celebratory meal at Mount Sinai, the prophet Isaiah looked forward to the days of the Messiah and portrayed it as a time of a great banquet for all people (Isa 25:6–9). This banquet was to be open to “all” nations. The prophet used the word “all” at least four times in these few verses so that we would know that *everyone* was invited to this feast. Isaiah often spoke of the universal nature of the rule of God over all peoples and nations (*cf.* Isa 2:2f; 14:1f; 45:20–25; 49:22; 60:1–22; 66:18–21). At this triumphant feast, God would provide the best of food and the finest of wine. At this banquet, all signs of mourning would be removed, and God would banish everything that darkens our lives. The reign of death would be destroyed forever, and mourning would no longer be a part of human experience. In that day, gladness and joy would fill the heart. What a remarkable thought it is that the God of all creation would share a meal with His creatures. “Sharing a meal has always been one of the most effective means of achieving and celebrating reconciliation and of bonding in general and one of the great metaphors for well-being, and as such it has featured prominently in religious representation and practice throughout the ages.”³ Isaiah employed the same metaphor that David did when he spoke of the rule of the Messiah and also pictured it as a feast (Psa 22:26, 29). The prophet used this same metaphor of feasts and celebrations on several other occasions as well (Isa 55:1–13; 65:1–25).

The ancient Jewish writers of the Pseudepigrapha often spoke of the days of the Messiah being ushered in with a great feast. During the intertestamental period, the writer of 1 Enoch longed for the day of salvation when “the righteous and elect ones” would “eat and rest and rise with that Son of Man forever and ever” (1 Enoch 62:13f).⁴ In the fifth or sixth century AD, the writer of 3

³Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, AB 19 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 358.

⁴James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Vol. 1* (New York:

Enoch looked forward to the day when Israel “shall eat with the Messiah” (3 Enoch 48:10).⁵

In the New Testament, Jesus gave a parable about the kingdom of heaven and compared it to a great wedding banquet given by a king for his son (Matt 22:1–14). It is evident, even to the casual reader, that the “king” in this passage is God Himself and His “son” is Christ Jesus our Lord. Nearly every Christian has heard this parable expounded on and marveled at those who would reject a direct invitation from the King of Kings. They might have even pondered those who accepted the invitation but showed up unprepared to be a guest of royalty.

Bible students will observe that this parable is similar to the parable of the great supper recorded by Luke (Luke 14:15–24). However, while these two parables have much in common, they have significant differences. Luke places his parable on our Lord’s way to Jerusalem, while Matthew places it after our Lord’s triumphant entry into the city. Luke speaks of a “man,” while Matthew tells us of a “king.” Luke speaks of a “great supper,” but Matthew tells us about a “wedding banquet” (HCSB). Luke describes the various “excuses” offered by the invited guests, while Matthew tells us the ungrateful guests simply went back to their ordinary lives. Luke speaks of “the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind” later being invited from the “streets, lanes and hedges” (back roads), but Matthew tells us of the king’s servants who went out to the “highways” (main roads) to invite people to the wedding feast. In Luke’s story, there is no parallel to the furious king sending “out his armies.” And finally, Luke says nothing about the sorting of the guests and the expulsion of a man lacking proper wedding attire.

What Prompted The Parable?

As you study the parables of Jesus, you come to realize that they were often given in response to some question or incident. The parable of the two debtors was given in response to Simon the Pharisee who wondered why Jesus allowed a sinful woman to

Yale University Press, 1983), 44.

⁵*Ibid.*

touch Him (Luke 7:36–50). The parable of the good Samaritan was given to answer the lawyer’s question, “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:25–37). The parable of the Pharisee and tax collector was spoken to those “who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others” (Luke 18:9–14). The parable of the ten minas was given as Jesus drew near Jerusalem, “because they thought the kingdom of God would appear immediately” (Luke 19:11–27).

The parable of the wedding banquet must be considered in the light of the rejection of Jesus as the Messiah by the religious establishment of His day. Matthew places this parable after the triumphant entry of Jesus into the city of Jerusalem (Matt 21:1–11), which had happened on the Sunday before our Lord’s death. On that Sunday, Jesus cleansed the temple (Matt 21:12f). The “blind and the lame” came to Jesus at the temple to be healed, and when the chief priests and scribes saw Jesus receive the adoration of the crowds, “they were indignant” (Matt 21:14–16). By calling Him “the Son of David,” the crowds were acknowledging that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. Jesus did not rebuke the crowds but instead accepted their praise. This acceptance of praise from the crowds was seen as an act of blasphemy by the Jewish leaders. Jesus then left the holy city and spent the night in Bethany (Matt 21:17).

The following morning, on His way back to Jerusalem, Jesus cursed the barren fig tree (Matt 21:18–22). Then, as He taught in the temple, the “chief priests and elders of the people” challenged His authority (Matt 21:23–27). Instead of answering their question regarding the source of His authority, Jesus challenged them concerning the baptism taught by John. They claimed they could not tell whether John’s baptism came “from heaven or from men” (they saw the trap and were not about to set foot in it). Jesus then told the story of the man who had two sons (Matt 21:28–32). The lesson to be gleaned from this story was that the temple aristocracy had disqualified themselves from leading the people. Jesus further insulted them by saying, “tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you.” This was a message they could not accept.

He then told the parable of a certain landowner who had prepared a vineyard (Matt 21:33–41). Any Jew hearing that parable would immediately think of Isaiah’s song of the vineyard (Isa 5:1–7). The parable given by Jesus takes place at harvest time when the landowner sent his servants to collect his rightful portion of the harvest, but the vinedressers “took his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another.” Finally, the landowner sent his best representative, his son, and the vinedressers treated him spitefully and killed him. Jesus then shows that the landowner was just in destroying “those wicked men.” Our Lord then made the application by changing metaphors. He was the “stone which the builders rejected” and had now become the “chief cornerstone” (Matt 21:42; *cf.* Psa 118:22). Jesus added insult to injury when He proclaimed, “the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it” (Matt 21:43). The chief priests and Pharisees finally understood the teaching of Jesus and realized that He was talking about them (Matt 21:45f). To further drive home His point about them rejecting the “chief cornerstone,” Jesus gave the parable of the wedding banquet (Matt 22:1–14).

The Great Invitation

A generous king, wanting to honor his son, had invited many guests to come and share in the joy of his son’s wedding day (Matt 22:2f). While some translations speak of a “wedding” (KJV, NKJV), most modern translations tell of the “wedding banquet” (HCSB, NET, CSB, NRSV) or “wedding feast” (ESV, NASB, CJB). All too often, we try to understand the stories of the Bible by overlaying them with our cultural predispositions. “We have forgotten that we read the Bible as foreigners, as visitors who have traveled not only to a new geography, but to a new century. We are literary tourists who are deeply in need of a guide.”⁶ This royal wedding invitation was not just for a “wedding ceremony” as we might think of it today, but for the wedding *and* the feast after the wedding, which could go on for as long as a week. The king sent out his

⁶Gary M. Burge, *The Bible and the Land* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 11.

“servants” or “slaves” (plural) to invite the guests, implying that a great number of people had been invited.

The phrase, “those who were invited” (Matt 22:3), suggests those who not only had been *invited* but had *accepted* the invitation from the king. In the village culture during the days of our Lord, it was customary first to invite the guests, and then at a later date give a second invitation to those who had accepted the first. One of the oldest books of the *Midrash* (a biblical interpretation by ancient Jewish authorities) is the *Lamentations Rabbah*, which is a commentary on the Old Testament book of Lamentations. The comments on Lamentations 4:2 give us a good deal of insight into ancient Jewish wedding customs. Concerning a wedding feast, we are told that “When one of them was invited to a banquet, he would not go unless he was invited twice.”⁷ The king’s servants went out to invite guests who have already agreed to come to the wedding feast. This is similar to the parable recorded by Luke, where servants were sent “to those who had been invited” (Luke 14:17 ESV). The invited guests knew the wedding was coming, and they had no excuse for not attending.

The king in this parable is God, the Holy One of Israel. The king’s son is our Lord Jesus Christ. The king’s servants (slaves) were the Old Testament prophets of God, such as Moses, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. God had invited the Jews to His banquet when He sent out His prophets, then later John the Baptist (Matt 3:1–3), and finally, this same invitation was given by Jesus Himself (Matt 4:17). These guests who had been invited first were the Jews. But sadly, as John would later record, Jesus “came to His own, and His own did not receive Him” (John 1:11). The second group of guests, those gathered from the highways, represent the Gentiles (including you and me). It has been observed that not less than fifty times in the four gospels the kingdom of heaven and related themes are referred to as a “feast”—the most joyful of social gatherings. The eternal Son of God left heaven to pursue His bride and has invited us to share in the hope, glory, and joy of heaven with Him.

⁷*Lamentations Rabbah : An Analytical Translation*, trans. J. Neusner (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989) 297.

The Rebellious Citizens

When the day of the wedding came, servants of the king happily announced that preparations were complete, and the banquet was ready (Matt 22:3). Sadly, those who had already agreed to attend “were not willing to come.” The king, in his mercy, sent out other servants to invite these ungrateful guests once again. The king had spared no expense, the oxen and fattened cattle had been slaughtered, and the banquet was ready to begin. Indeed, “all things are ready” (Matt 22:4). We hear the urgency of the servant’s message as they said, “Come to the wedding” (Matt 22:4).

The invited guests not only rejected the invitation again, but they showed contempt for their king when they “made light of it” (Matt 22:5). As Simon J. Kistemaker observed, “Even though they knew that a royal invitation was equivalent to a royal command, they refused to acknowledge the king’s announcement.”⁸ Not content with just rejecting the invitation, they “seized his servants, treated them spitefully, and killed them” (Matt 22:6). Rejecting the invitation of the king would be seen not only as an insult but as rejecting his authority as well; they had no fear of their king. This went beyond common discourtesy to the point of rebellion. The king, who had only intended good with his invitation, has been insulted, ridiculed, and rebelled against. Not only that, but they have dishonored his son as well.

Unlike the parable of the great supper recorded by Luke (Luke 14:16–24), these people offered no excuse for their actions. They were unfaithful to their commitment to attend and unashamed of their actions. While the NKJV says the people “made light of” the invitation, other translations say, “they paid no attention” (HCSB), or “were indifferent” (NET). They were far more concerned with the affairs of this world than the things of God. This was not a case that the people were on their deathbed and could not attend, for the people “went their ways, one to his own farm, another to his business” (Matt 22:5). At this point, we remember the words of our Lord, Who, with tears in His eyes, told the inhabitants of Jerusalem, “How often I wanted to gather your children together,

⁸Simon J. Kistemaker, *The Parables* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1980), 92.

as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!” (Matt 23:37).

The Jews had a long history of rejecting God’s prophets. Jesus would later condemn the Pharisees for adorning the tombs of the prophets while at the same time manifesting the attitude of their fathers who had “murdered the prophets” (Matt 23:29–36). As Stephen would put it, “Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers...” (Acts 7:52f).

People today often offer shallow excuses for not accepting the King’s invitation. Some are more concerned about what their friends and family might say than they are about the reaction of their King. Other people are weighed down by the cares of this world. Sadly, the majority of people in our day are too consumed with material things to have any interest in the kingdom of heaven. Even those who have been raised in households where God’s name is praised, and His written word studied, often see no need of honoring our great King or His Son.

The Furious King

Our glorious King, as loving as He is, has a limit to His patience. The rebellious people, having rejected two sets of the king’s servants, will now receive a visit from the third group of messengers—the king’s army (Matt 22:7). In this passage, we remember God’s words to the generation of Noah, “My Spirit shall not strive with man forever” (Gen 6:3). The king now laments that “Those who were invited were not worthy” (Matt 22:8). Their “unworthiness” was not a comment on their merits but on their rejection of the king’s gracious invitation. After Paul and Barnabas had preached at the synagogue in Antioch in Pisidia, Paul told the Jews who opposed them, “It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles” (Acts 13:46). As we see the anger of the king towards his ungrateful guests, we hear the words of Isaiah to the

ungrateful people of his day who forsook the Lord and forgot His holy mountain (Isa 65:11–13).

The date of the writing of the gospel of Matthew is not known for sure. If Irenaeus (c. 130–c. 202 AD) is correct that Matthew wrote his gospel “while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome”⁹, then the book would have been written shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. However, any Jew reading this parable after the destruction of the holy city would immediately think of the armies of Titus plundering the temple, burning the city to the ground, and not leaving one stone upon another (Matt 24:2). Titus, like Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus before him, acted as a servant of God in carrying out His will (cf. Dan 2:37f; Ezek 26:7; Isa 45:1). It was God, not Titus, who ultimately destroyed the city of Jerusalem. It is generally understood that more than one million Jews had been crowded into the holy city before Titus and his legions surrounded it. As Josephus would later record concerning the burning of the temple, “as for that house, God had for certain long ago doomed it to the fire; and now that fatal day was come, according to the revolution of ages.”¹⁰ Titus left the Phasaelus, Hippicus, and Mariamne towers of the city walls “in order to demonstrate to posterity what kind of city it was, and how well fortified, which the Roman valor had subdued.”¹¹ Josephus went on to say, “the rest of the wall, it was so thoroughly laid even with the ground by those that dug it up to the foundation, that there was left nothing to make those that came thither believe it had ever been inhabited.”¹² The final expulsion of the Jews from the land took place after the failure of the Bar Kokhba Revolt in AD 135. The destruction of the city that had seized the king’s servants, “treated them spitefully, and killed them” (Matt 22:6) was now complete.

⁹Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, trans. A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, and A. Coxe, in *The Apostolic Fathers With Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ANF 1 (Christian Literature Company, 1885), 3.1.1.

¹⁰Flavius Josephus, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987), *Jewish War* 6.250.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 7.1–2.

¹²*Ibid.*, 7.3.

Room To Spare

When the original invitees spurned the invitation of the king, the king did not hide in despair—instead, he invited those assumed to have no social status—the downtrodden and outcasts of society (Matt 22:9f). The king’s son was still going to be honored but by a different group of guests. The king’s servants are sent to the “highways” to “gather all whom they found.” Or, as the HCSB reads, the servants went “to where the roads exit the city and invite everyone you find to the banquet.” These guests, marginal people from various walks of life, were not “worthy” of the king’s invitation, and even though they were unaccustomed to such royal banquets, they would appreciate the invitation and gladly accept it. These new guests had never dreamed that they would have ever been invited to such a feast. Now, “the wedding hall was filled with guests” (Matt 22:10). The original intent of the king (*i.e.*, honoring his son) was going to be accomplished and his purpose fulfilled. The king would not be embarrassed to be seen with such people, for his goal from the beginning had been to honor his son.

As we watch the servants of the king invite those from the highway, both good and bad, to the wedding banquet, we recall Isaiah’s prophecy that “a nation you do not know” will glorify “the Holy One of Israel” (Isa 55:5). In the Law of Moses, eunuchs and foreigners were expressly prohibited from entering “the assembly of the Lord” (Deut 23:1–8). However, Isaiah looked forward to the day when eunuchs and foreigners would “join themselves to the Lord, to serve Him” and God would give them a name “better than that of sons and daughters” (Isa 56:3–6; *cf.* 65:1f). In Luke’s account of the parable of the great supper, the master of the house told his servant, “Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in here the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind” (Luke 14:21).

The Dead Sea Scrolls, presumably written by an Essene community at Qumran, contains one scroll titled, “The Messianic Rule” or “The Rule of the Congregation” (dated to 100–75 BC). The scroll describes a banquet “when the Messiah has been revealed,”

and at that banquet the “men of reputation” would be in attendance (1QSa 2:11–12).¹³ These pious guests would “sit before him by rank” at a communal table filled with bread and wine (1QSa 2.15, 17).¹⁴ At this banquet, anyone with a “physical handicap,” such as those who were “lame, blind, deaf, dumb” or crippled would be excluded (1QSa 2.5–6).¹⁵ How far removed the pious men of Qumran were from the vision of Isaiah and the sentiment expressed by Jesus in the parable of the great supper.

Jesus violated the cultural standards of His day as He was often seen with “tax collectors and sinners” and other outcasts of society (Matt 9:11; 11:19). Not only was He seen in the presence of such outcasts, but He ate and drank with them as well (Mark 2:15f; Luke 15:2). Even in our day, we need to be reminded that Jesus “did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance” (Matt 9:13).

Once the Jews rejected the gospel, and others had been called to take their place, we understand what Jesus meant when He said, “Other sheep I have which are not of this fold” (John 10:16). We now grasp God’s word through the prophet Hosea, “Then I will say to those who were not My people, ‘You are My people!’ And they shall say, ‘You are my God!’” (Hos 2:23). We can properly discern Paul’s plea to his Jewish brethren, when he says, “I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles” (Rom 11:11). On another occasion, Jesus spoke of many coming “from the east and west” and sitting down with the Patriarchs “in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 8:11).

Is God dishonored by having those from the “highways” attend the banquet instead of His original invitees? The simple answer is “no,” for these people ought to be all the more grateful to their King. The poor beggars on the street would certainly appreciate the “oxen and fattened cattle” more than those wealthy merchants and farmers who could have such delicacies whenever they desired.

¹³Michael O. Wise, Martin G. Abegg Jr., and Edward M. Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (New York: HarperOne, 2005), 140.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵*Ibid.*

The Unprepared Guest

As the king passed through the banquet hall, he would see endless rows of guests reclining upon beautiful couches. This gracious king would rejoice that his son was finally being honored. However, his smile is replaced by a frown as his eyes soon fall upon one particular guest who appears to be insulting the royal family. Even though all of these guests had been invited, they still had an obligation to wear proper wedding attire (Matt 22:11–13).

It is often suggested that in the ancient Near East kings would provide the garments for their guests (*cf.* Gen 45:22; Jdg 14:12; 2 Kng 25:29; Est 6:8f). By not wearing the proper garments, this guest has insulted the king. If this passage is not talking about garments supplied by the host, then it must refer to guests wearing the best clothing available to them. However, since these guests had come “off the streets,” it seems likely that the king would have had to supply wedding garments for this banquet. Either way, this guest was disrespecting his host by wearing apparel that was less than the best he had available. The king addressed the man as “Friend,” implying that he was willing to listen to any reasonable cause for the man’s actions. However, the unprepared guest was “speechless,” indicating that he recognized his fault. This man had no excuse for his actions and was then bound and taken away to a place of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (a punishment that could only be handed out by God). Here we are reminded of Zephaniah’s words, “Be silent in the presence of the Lord God; for the day of the Lord is at hand, for the Lord has prepared a sacrifice; He has invited His guests. And it shall be, in the day of the Lord’s sacrifice, that I will punish the princes and the king’s children, and all such as are clothed with foreign apparel” (Zeph 1:7f).

There is no indication that the servants of the king passed through the banquet hall to inspect the guests. The job of the servants was merely to invite people to the banquet. It was the king himself who “saw a man there who did not have on a wedding garment.” Perhaps this inspection by the king of his guests is an allusion to the words of John the Baptist, who told the Pharisees and Sadducees to “bear fruits worthy of repentance” (Matt 3:8).

As Isaiah painted the scene of the great invitation of our King, he reminds us that God's ways and man's ways are not the same (Isa 55:9). Isaiah then proceeded to tell us that God's word will accomplish its intended purpose (Isa 55:11f). As we share the message of the King, we must be careful to avoid trying to decide who will reject the message before they hear it—for we are often wrong. Our job is to sow the seed of the kingdom and let God take care of the increase (1 Cor 3:6f).

Conclusion

Jesus does not end this parable on a positive note (Matt 22:14). He does not say, "And the redeemed lived happily ever after." Instead, He suggests that not all those who received an invitation will enjoy the banquet (the blessings of the kingdom). The Mishnah claims that "All Israelites have a share in the world to come" (Sanh. 10.1),¹⁶ but Jesus disagrees. It is everlastingly true that our God has "no pleasure in the death of the wicked" (Ezek 33:11; 18:23). The invitation of the gospel is extended to all because our benevolent God is "not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Pet 3:9). However, we must come to God on His terms, not ours.

In our Lord's parable of the wedding banquet, the king extended a kind and gracious invitation in offering people an opportunity to share in the joy of his son. The ungrateful people who had been invited twice dishonored both the king and his son. The furious king dispatched those thankless people and invited others to a great banquet so his son would be honored. However, all those invited were expected to give the honor that was due to the king and his son. In application, the nation of Israel had been invited to a royal banquet with God, but instead, they rejected His prophets and finally killed His Son. God destroyed Herod's temple, leveled the city of Jerusalem, and then the call of the gospel went out "into all the world" (Matt 28:18).

The kingdom of heaven can be despised in two ways. First, by those who reject the generous offer of the King. And second, by

¹⁶Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 397.

those who tacitly accept His invitation, but then dishonor the king by not showing Him due reverence. If the Jews represent the first recipients of the king's invitation to the wedding banquet, then you and I must be those gathered from the highways. We have been given a great privilege of which we are not worthy, but with that privilege comes responsibility. While it is true that we "come boldly to the throne of grace" (Heb 4:16), we must never forget that we are still unworthy servants coming before a glorious King.

Near the end of the New Testament, an angel of God told John, "Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev 19:9). After hearing these words, John, in his enthusiasm, falls to worship the angel who told him the good news of the marriage feast. The angel refuses John's worship and reminds him that only Deity is worthy of such honor (Rev 19:10). This marriage supper of the Lamb had been seen through a mist at Mount Sinai, prophesied by Isaiah, and promised by our Lord Himself. This marriage supper of the Lamb is the culmination of human history, and the King of the universe invites you and me to join in that celebration.

Contributors

Dennis G. Allan is married to Benita K. (Speer) Allan, whom he met at Florida College and married in 1980. They have three children, Heather, Megan (Pinto), and Joshua, and ten grandchildren (eight who are currently in Brazil, and two in the USA). Dennis is originally from Elkins, WV and grew up in West Virginia and Ohio. He earned the A.A. from Florida College in 1980, and the B.A. degree from Northern Illinois University in 1992. In the United States he has served as preacher of the gospel in Cincinnati, OH (1980–1985), Bay City, MI (1985–1990), and Rochelle, IL (1990–1993), but most of his work has been in Brazil. He was in São Paulo, Brazil from 1993–2017, and has lived and worked in Jarinu, Brazil since then. Dennis has done teaching, preaching and public forum studies throughout Brazil and occasionally in Chile and Argentina. His English language publications include co-editing the book *Is It Lawful? A Comprehensive Study of Divorce*, and several articles in *Christianity Magazine* and *Biblical Insights*. His Portuguese language publications include numerous print (bulletins, tracts, books) and internet publications, as well as managing a website of Portuguese Bible study material (together with Karl Hennecke) that reaches people throughout Brazil and abroad. Since 2011, he has authored a twice-weekly column in a regional Brazilian newspaper.

Payton “PJ” Anderson is from Irving, TX and was raised in Omaha, NE. He is married to Haley Anderson and they live in Seffner, FL. PJ earned the B.A. degree in Biblical Studies from Florida College in 2015. While he was in college, he did summer preaching internships at congregations including Hot Springs Church of Christ in Hot Springs, AR, Colledgeview Church of Christ in Florence, AL,

and Vivion Road Church of Christ in Kansas City, MO. He completed a preacher training program at the Downtown Church of Christ in Rogers, AR after graduation from Florida College, and currently serves as the evangelist at the Seffner Church of Christ (September 2016-present). In addition, PJ is the Head Coach the Men's Soccer Team at Florida College .

David Banning and his wife Heidi have two children Todd (wife Laura) and Jonathan (wife Leah), and a granddaughter, Ellison. David was born and raised in Houston, TX and attended Florida College. He has worked with churches in Huntsville, TX, Joliet, IL, Orlando, FL, Vestavia Hills, AL and currently works with the Dowlen Road congregation in Beaumont, TX. He has done special studies for youth in the US and Mexico as well as teacher training classes. His publications include the *Get Them Talking* series and the *Tackling The Text* series of books.

Matthew W. Bassford is from Somers Point, NJ and grew up in Columbia, MO. He is married to Lauren Bassford, and they have two children, Zoë and Mark. Matthew holds the B.A. and B.J. degrees from the University of Missouri, and the J.D. degree from the University of Texas. He has preached with the church in Joliet, IL (April 2006-October 2017) and currently works with the Jackson Heights Church of Christ, in Columbia, TN (October 2017-present). Matthew has been involved in writing hymns for 22 years, and maintains a blog on worship and other spiritual issues at hisexcellentword.blogspot.com. Around 10 of his hymns have been published in hardbound hymnals, and considerably more in various supplements and slide decks. He is currently a member of the lyric-editing committee of "Timeless," an organization dedicated to producing a psalter suitable for modern a-cappella congregational use. More information is available at timelesspsalter.com.

Jonathan Caldwell is from McKenzie, TN and grew up in Muscle Shoals, AL. He and his wife Tiffany (Poe) have three children, James Grant (2008); Lillian Gail (2010); and Charles Gregory

(2014). Jonathan graduated from Florida College with an A.A. degree in 2005 and a B.A. in Biblical Studies in 2007. He received an MBA from the University of Phoenix in 2010 and is currently pursuing an M.A. in New Testament Studies from Johnson University. He began preaching full time in 2006 in Yuma, AZ, and started his work with the church in Russellville, AL in August 2009. Jonathan currently works with the church in Moody, AL (since 2018). He has published articles in *Biblical Insights* and has contributed essays to be published in a forthcoming sequel to *Beneath the Cross - Lead Me to Calvary: More Meditations on the Memorial Meal*. He is also currently conducting research that explores Paul's first letter to Timothy as an ancient household code for the local church, and is a member of the Evangelical Theological Society.

Edwin L. Crozier is married to Marita (Bobbitt). They live in Land O' Lakes, FL and have four children, Tessa Marchetta, Ethan Crozier, Ryan Crozier, and Trina Crozier. Tessa and Ethan are currently students at Florida College. Edwin was born in Mountain Home, ID. His father served in the Air Force so Edwin grew up moving around. He spent his junior high and high school years in Blytheville, AR. Edwin earned a B.S. degree in English from the University of North Alabama and has worked with the following congregations: Lake Road Church of Christ in Dyersburg, TN (1995), the Dowlen Road congregation in Beaumont, TX (1996–2003), the church in Franklin, TN (2003–2010), the church in Brownsburg, IN (2010–2014), and the Christians Who Meet on Livingston Avenue in Lutz, FL (2014-Present). He is the author of several books: *Plugged In: High Voltage Prayer* (both as a paperback and a class book format), *Walks with God*; *Built by the Lord: Studies on the Home*; *The Gospel of the Kingdom: A Study of the Sermon on the Mount*; *Love Like a Samaritan*; and *Getting to Did*. He also authored the study and class books *Praying Like the Psalmists*; *Grace: God's Power to Overcome Sin*; and *Give Attention to Reading*.

David Padfield is from Kokomo, Indiana. He has his wife Sharon have three children, Dan, Alan, and Sean. He has worked as

an evangelist in Bowling Green, KY (1978–1981), Evansville, IN (1981–1993), and Zion, IL (1993–present). David has conducted six public debates (Mormonism, three on Baptism, Premillennialism, and Limited Benevolence) and has been a frequent visitor to the lands of the Bible (Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, Greece, and Italy). He is also a content contributor at FreeBibleImages.com. His published materials include Bible class books on nearly every book of the Bible, over a dozen sermon outline books, and numerous booklets on Bible history and geography. He has over 3,500 photos of the Bible lands available at no charge on his website (www.padfield.com). David holds membership in the Society Of Biblical Literature and the Biblical Archaeology Society, he is a Sustaining Member of Associates For Biblical Research, a Patron Member of the National Rifle Association, and a Charter Member of the National Association of Photoshop Professionals.

Mark Roberts is originally from Columbus, OH. He and his wife Dena have been married for 36 years and have two daughters, Becca Hunt (married to Stephen) and Sara Whisenhunt (married to Garrett). Mark attended Florida College (1982–1983), earned the Bachelor of Business Administration from the University of Texas at Tyler (1985), and the Master of Science in Biblical and Related Studies from Abilene Christian University in 1998. He began preaching in 1985 and has worked with churches in Odessa, East Irving, and Port Arthur, TX, and since September 1992 he has been with the Westside congregation in Irving. Mark is the author of *Understanding Apocalyptic Literature: A Guide to the book of Revelation* along with several workbooks, including the *Am I Ready?* lesson book. He is the editor of the digital subscription journal *Pressing On Magazine*, and the creator of the “Commended Commentaries List.” He is currently writing a book on Romans. In addition to being a self-proclaimed coffee geek, Mark is an avid hunter and a fan of C. S. Lewis’ writings and works. Mark and Dena love to visit lighthouses, a passion which inspired *Evelyn’s Lighthouse*, a young adult mystery Mark co-authored with his niece, Patience Clevenger. They have one grandchild, Maddox Hunt.

Jared W. Saltz was born in Birmingham, AL and grew up in Cullman and Gadsden, AL. He and his wife Kathryn have two daughters, Abigail (age 4) and Hadassah (age 7) and the family resides in Temple Terrace, FL. Jared has earned the M.A. degree in Biblical Studies from Amridge University, the M.Phil. degree in Judaica, Hebraica, and Cognate Studies from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institution of Religion, and is currently finishing a Ph.D. program in Hebrew Bible in its Greco-Roman Context from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institution of Religion. He is currently a faculty member in the Department of Biblical Studies at Florida college and works with the Lord's people in Palmetto, FL (now in his 4th year there). His published work includes "The Law as Pedagogue: Paul's Usage of *Paidagogos*," in *Elementary Teachings about the Christ* (Florida College Bookstore Press, 2017) and "What Should We Do with the Hebrew Bible?" in *Inquire of Past Generations: Lessons from Church History* (Florida College Lectures 2018). Jared also holds memberships in the Society of Biblical Literature and the Association for Jewish Studies.

Phillip Shumake grew up in White House, TN. He and his wife Tracy have two children, Andrew and Abigail. Phillip attended Florida College and earned a B.S. degree in Communications from Middle Tennessee State University (2002). He also completed a two-year preacher training program at the Kleinwood Church of Christ in Spring, TX (2003–2004.) His previous work as an evangelist has been with the Beverly Shores Church of Christ in Leesburg, FL (2005–2008) and the East End Church of Christ in Lexington, KY (2008–2016). He currently works with the Embury Hills Church of Christ in Atlanta, GA (2016 to present). Phillip has also done graphic design for numerous religious books and websites. His published materials include *Lifelong Zeal: How To Build Lasting Passion For God*, a contributor to *Do Things Well: The Pursuit of Excellence*, and articles in *Biblical Insights* and *Truth Magazine*.

Jeremy N. Sweets graduated from Florida College in 1999 and is married to Jessica (Douthitt). They have four children, Naomi, Lily,

Clara, and Ezra. Jeremy is from Lawrenceburg, KY and attended Overland Church of Christ, and the family currently lives in Nashville, TN. He earned the A.A. degree from Florida College, the B.A. degree from Western Kentucky University (2001), and the M.Div. degree from Lipscomb University (2012). He worked for eighteen years in the IT Industry in Analytics and Database Design and currently works HCA as Manager of Business Intelligence and preaches for the Church of Christ at Broadmoor (January 2002–present). Jeremy has a special interest in Biblical Languages and Old Testament Literature.

Neil Tremblett is originally from Toronto, Ontario, Canada. He and his wife Heather have five children, Kaylynn (age 11), Isabel (age 11), Tristan (age 9), Tait (age 9), and Marah (age 7). Neil was raised Toronto, Smithville (Ontario), and Bonavista, Newfoundland. He is a first-generation Christian and spent most of his formative years in the foster care system in Canada. He attended Florida College from and has worked with the Lord's people in Burkesville, Ky (2002–2006), the Westside Church in Bloomington, IN (2006–2012), and the church in Greenwood, IN (2013–present). Neil and his family presently live in Whiteland, IN and he leads an after-school program for troubled children in Toronto, Canada. Additionally, Neil has held gospel meetings in KY, NV, VA, IN, OH, and Canada.

Dominic Venuso and his wife Jen have six children, Aletheia, Adlai, Joanna, Damarion, Kara, and Benjamin. Dominic was born and raised in Chicago-land area and has earned a M.A. degree in New Testament from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He has preached in Pine City, MN and currently preaches in Rochelle, IL (for nearly ten years).

Norm Webb, Jr. married Barbara Jo (Britnell) Webb (Florida College class of 1994) in 1994. They currently live in Athens, AL and have three children, Emily Jane Hardesty (class of 2017), Kara Webb (classes of 2018 and 2020), and Sabrina Webb (class of 2020).

Norm was born in Wilmington, OH and grew up in central Florida (Tampa, Lakeland, and Melbourne). He earned the A.A. degree from Florida College in 1993, and holds Series 7 and Series 66 securities licenses. He has worked as an evangelist for the Congdon Avenue Church of Christ in Elgin, IL (1994–2000), the Corinth/Jones Road Church of Christ in Athens, AL (2000–2011), and the Elkton Church of Christ in Elkton, TN (2015–present). He has also served as Vice President of Athens Bible School (2011–2016) and a Financial Advisor for Edward Jones Investments (2016–present). Norm has also done foreign evangelism in Guangzhou China and San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico. He has written articles that have appeared in Christianity Magazine the CEI Lectures.

Coulter A. Wickerham is married to Lauren (Owen; Florida College class of 2001). They have three children, Emma (age 13), Lydia (age 12), and Scott (age 8), and live in Fort Worth, TX. Coulter was born and raised in Kentucky, then earned a B.A. degree in Biblical Studies from Florida College in 2005. He studied in summer training programs with J. F. Dancer in Beaver Dam, KY, and Todd Chandler in Bowling Green, KY before doing a two-year program with Larry Coffey, Paul Earnhart, and Mark McCrary in Louisville, KY. He then preached for the Moultrie Road church in Thomasville, GA and the Lilburn congregation in Atlanta, GA before moving in 2018 to work with the Castleberry church in River Oaks, TX. Coulter and Lauren have been counselors for twelve years at Kamp Kennessee, a Florida College Camp. They have both served in officer positions for numerous Florida College booster clubs and Hutchinson Bell chapters. He has published essays in *Beneath The Cross: Essays and Reflections on the Lord's Supper* (DeWard Publishing, 2008) and *Elementary Teaching About The Christ* (Florida College Press, 2017).

