

Magazine

What Are Parables and Why Were They Used in the Bible?

Daniel H. King, Sr.

Parables are a familiar sight in the Bible, especially in the teachings of Jesus. They are also found in the Old Testament, however, and outside the Bible as well. When Jesus utilized this method of teaching, he was employing a technique which was comfortable for his audience. Many of those who heard him were illiterate. They could not read or write. Story telling made the spiritual lessons of Christ understandable and real. Spiritual principles were removed from the realm of ideas and philosophy and planted in the real world of people.

In our own time there is a continuing need for the biblical parables. And even for storytelling that is appropriate and applicable. If it illustrates an important scriptural idea, then it is appropriate. If it makes application of important scriptural teachings or doctrines, then it is applicable. This is certainly so in sermons. Charles Spurgeon once said that “A sermon without illustrations is like a room without windows.” This is true because an illustration is a veritable “window through which you see the point.” If there is no spiritual lesson or biblical principle to be learned, then storytelling is simply entertainment. Some preaching, unfortunately, has lost its way, and this is precisely what it has become. Those who promote this sort of “preaching” can take no consolation from the parables of Christ, for they always taught spiritual truth.

Why are the biblical parables important to us in the twenty-first century? Why ought we to study them? Beyond even this, we might ask whether storytelling through the parables is important in our own time. Jim Bowman, Director of *Scriptures in Use*, noted the following surprising facts of the world in our own “more advanced” age:

Special Issue — The Parables of Jesus

- Over two-thirds of the world’s population receive most of their information orally;
- For over one third of the world’s population (more than 2 billion people), oral communication is the only source of information;
- 95% of women in the Islamic world can only be reached through oral communication;
- More than 75% of the Bible consists of stories. Adding poetry and proverbs leaves probably less than 10% abstract ‘intellectual’ content;
- Traditional Western forms of communication will only reach the 10% intellectual elite in untaught people groups, storytelling will reach the rest.

Bowman argues that “storytelling turns discouraged, marginalized, semi-literate believers into powerful evangelists with great impact, a sense of fulfillment, personal value and new hope.”

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The Sower

Frank Himmel

The Sower is one of only a handful of parables recorded in Matthew (13:3-23), Mark (4:2-20), and Luke (8:4-15). Some call it "the father of parables" or "the parable of parables." Jesus pointed to its foundational nature when he asked, "Do you not understand this parable? And how will you understand all the parables" (Mark 4:13)? What makes the Sower so basic? For one thing, is among the simplest of the Lord's illustrative stories. More to the point, it is a lesson about the way we respond to truth. Mark says Jesus began the story with "Listen!"

The Setting

Jesus came preaching the gospel of the kingdom. He authenticated his preaching by miracles, especially healing every kind of disease and sickness (Matt. 4:23). Throughout Galilee, multitudes gathered around him. Those crowds included people of varying degrees of spiritual interest and discernment.

Not everyone was impressed with Jesus. The Pharisees had already become his enemies. Their principle complaints were what he said about himself and his conduct on the Sabbath. Jesus, in turn, singled them out in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:20), challenging their standard of righteousness. It was increasingly evident that the kingdom Jesus preached was not what many had anticipated.

One day Jesus sat by the Sea of Galilee. A multitude again gathered. Jesus got into a boat and sat down. From that floating pulpit, he presented a series of parables revealing the nature of the kingdom. The Sower was the first in the group. It is about "the word of the kingdom" (Matt. 13:19).

The Story

"The sower went out to sow." A farmer took to the field. Walking up and down the field, he grabbed a handful of seed from his bag or perhaps the fold of his garment and tossed it back and forth evenly across the soil. That seed found a variety of homes.

Some fell beside the road. Historians say the fields of Palestine were divided into small plots, separated by narrow walkways. Community gardens in our modern era have the same layout. The walkway or "road" was packed from traffic. The seed could not penetrate it. It was trampled, and the birds made a quick end of it.

Some fell on rocky soil. The picture is not of dirt littered with stones but of a thin layer of soil atop bedrock. There was sufficient soil for the seed

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The Parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven

Brian Price

In the parables, Jesus takes some of the simplest things in life and uses them to demonstrate great spiritual truths. Such is the case in the parables of the mustard seed and leaven. Both illustrations share a common principle concerning the kingdom of God. The parables are found in Mark 4:26-32 and in Matthew 13:31-33. Take some time to read the thoughts in those passages as we begin our effort to understand the teachings of Jesus.

**“Whereunto shall we liken the kingdom of God?”
Mark 4:26, 30; Matthew 13:31, 33**

The point of these parables (as is common to the parables) was to illustrate a particular point concerning the kingdom. To preach and teach concerning the coming kingdom was a point of emphasis for Jesus. He stated in Mark 1:15, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel.” Through the parables, Jesus was able to give the future citizens a glimpse into this kingdom. Many of the details concerning the kingdom presented difficulties even for his chosen disciples. Even after his death, burial, and resurrection they were still awaiting a physical kingdom (Acts 1:6). Though the parables are examples based on earthly things, we should make every effort to gain a spiritual understanding. People from every physical kingdom now have access to the spiritual kingdom of God through the shed blood of Jesus Christ (Acts 17:26-27). What do we learn about that kingdom from these parables?

**Planting the Seed and Adding the Leaven
Mark 4:26, 31; Matthew 13:31, 33**

The growth of the kingdom would occur from humble beginnings. With the planting of the seed or the adding of leaven what seemed too small to have any real effect begins to slowly produce an extraordinary outcome. The desire to produce the fruits of growth brings an element of responsibility. When we choose to encourage growth in the kingdom of God we should take great caution. When we examine passages like 1 Corinthians 3:10-15, we can clearly see the sobering responsibility of building up the kingdom in the proper manner. The effectiveness of our work will be determined by the standard of God, and reward will only come to those who build according to the pattern. From other parables we learn that the seed is the word of God, and it is the testimony of Scripture that will allow us to have the proper effect upon the kingdom.

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With that said, let us also consider the great privilege we have to plant the seeds of the kingdom. It was by God's design that we should become a vessel by which the world would come to know him and his kingdom (2 Cor. 4:5-7). God has never promised the quantity of fruit that will be produced, nor has he guaranteed that every heart would be receptive to the leaven of his word. However, we can guarantee failure on our part if we refuse to plant the seed or add the leaven. Each citizen should count it a blessing to do their part in building up the kingdom of God.

**“Less Than All Seeds” Becomes
“Greater Than All Herbs”
Mark 4:31-32; Matthew 13:32**

Anyone who has worked a little in a garden cannot help but be amazed at how something as small as a seed can eventually grow to be much larger than its humble beginnings. To begin with a tiny mustard seed and end with a tree that was large enough for the birds to lodge is a testament to the nature of the kingdom of God. From a common man named John, wearing clothes of camel hair and crying in the wilderness (Matt. 3:3-4), to a carpenter's son from Nazareth (John 1:46), the kingdom of God began to be preached. Those humble beginnings lead us to the most significant event in the history of mankind. The death, burial, and resurrection of the King of Kings paved the way for the establishment of his kingdom, fulfilled by his apostles and recorded in Acts chapter 2.

We must never convince ourselves that the seed and leaven of God are not powerful enough to have an effect on men today. The simplicity of the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is still the “power unto salvation” (Rom. 1:16). We should never grow weary in well doing (Gal. 6:9) but continue to do our part to help the growth of the kingdom. We may feel as though our contributions are no more than the size of a mustard seed but no contribution to the cause of Christ is insignificant. We should never underestimate the power of God's word. Great things can come if I will fulfill my role to plant the seed. We stand in awe at the thought that “the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:41). We are amazed when we hear, “the number of the disciples *multiplied* in Jerusalem exceedingly” (Acts 6:7). We do not know whether we will ever see growth in the kingdom described in that manner during our lifetime. It is not our function to determine the outcome of sowing the seed. We stand in the way of growth when we predetermine who will and will not receive the word. It is said of the man in Mark 4:27 that he looks out at the plant that has now sprung forth from that seed, and “he knoweth not how.” He does not fully understand how it happened but he does not allow his lack of knowledge to discourage him from planting the seed. There may be times where we do not understand how it is possible for the seed to take root in the lives of some men and produce the fruit of God. We may be

convinced that someone has so distanced themselves from God that they cannot be reached. Plant the seed despite our doubts. We should learn to stand amazed when men reject the seed of God's word and begin to expect that the word can change even the most sinful of men. Ananias had no desire to take the word of God to Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9:13-14). Saul had come to bring hardship upon all who claimed the name of Jesus and would appear to be the most unlikely of candidates to respond to the gospel. Yet the seed was able to bring forth fruit even in the life of one who had consented unto the deaths of many of God's faithful (Acts 26:9-11). Every Christian should stop trying to figure out who will and will not receive the seed. As our parable states, we do not know how the seed will affect each person. If the “mustard seed” could bring Saul of Tarsus into the kingdom, it can work today as well.

**“Is Like Unto Leaven”
Matthew 13:33**

In the same manner that the small mustard seed can grow into a large tree, a little leaven can have a much larger impact than its small beginnings. Leaven is often used in Scripture to show the negative impact of what sin can do in our lives. Jesus warned of the leaven of the Pharisees in Matthew 16:6. Paul warned those in Corinth that they should purge out the leaven of sin before the entire congregation was overwhelmed by it (1 Cor. 5:6-8). Our parable illustrates that we should replace the leaven of sin with the leaven of the kingdom of God. It is obvious that more people are spreading the leaven of sin rather than the leaven of God. We should not let that discourage us. Though our lives and circle of influence may seem small, we can add a little leaven to a world given to sin. For every soul that responds to God's word another set of opportunities to share the message of the kingdom is produced. As you read through the book of Acts you will see that leaven at work. You see the persecutions that Christians were suffering and as they were scattered they took the gospel with them (Acts 8:1-4). Their world was being leavened by their efforts. How much leaven am I bringing to mine?

**“Because The Harvest Is Come”
Mark 4:29**

Without a planting there can be no harvest. We often become discouraged because we don't see the growth we would like. In the midst of that discouragement many do the worst thing possible for the future growth of the kingdom. They quit planting! We have lost our faith in God who will add the increase (1 Cor. 3:6). Let us begin with a new fervor to plant the “mustard seed” and add the “leaven” of the kingdom of God. There are souls to be reached! Let us determine to continue to do the work of God until he determines that man's work is done (John 9:4).

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The Hidden Treasure and The Pearl of Great Price

Dick Blackford

Parables bear similarity to proverbs in that they are “mind-stickers.” These twin parables are two of the shortest given by Jesus but they are filled with meaning. At the same time we must be reminded that while Jesus usually had one or two central points he was making, he was not endorsing every detail given. He certainly was not endorsing the dishonesty of the unrighteous steward (Luke 16:1-13) but only used it to make the point that people of the world often use more wisdom in pursuing their goals than Christians do in pursuing that which is of far more value.

Likewise, we will see things in these two parables which Jesus was not endorsing. Nor should we assume some hidden meaning in each word.

The Hidden Treasure

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in the field; which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field (Matt. 13:44).

The parable may sound strange to twenty-first century readers. Today, we see banks on almost every corner. They were not very plentiful, accessible, or as safe in Bible times as they are today.

When life was mostly rural, the ground was still considered to be the safest place to hide your cherished possessions. The one talent man thought he was doing the safe thing by burying his talent in the ground. Barclay points out that, in Palestine, a land that has been the most fought over in the world, governments change and people often flee their home but they hope one day to return and reclaim their treasure.

Sometimes the owner of the treasure would die and his family would not know where it was buried. In one sense, the treasure belonged to the land owner or the one who hid it there. Jewish law operated on the principle of “finder’s keepers.” To dwell on whether the finder was being deceptive by not informing the property owner and trying to

learn who the treasure belonged to, but instead purchased the field himself for less than its real value, is to miss the point of the parable. Jesus was not trying to justify any wrong doing. The point of the parable lies in the *joy* of the discovery and the determined drive and sacrificial spirit the man had to obtain it.

The gospel of the kingdom is a valuable treasure, more to be desired than much fine gold (Ps. 19:10). Some find this treasure when going about their normal duties, when least expecting it. They may get it from a friend at school or at work, a neighbor, the radio, a tract, etc. I know people who were raised in religious error and later discovered the truth. They felt so fortunate and expressed gratitude and joy that they had escaped the bondage of religious error. The man in the parable wasn’t looking for it but when he found it he recognized its value.

Sometimes the truth lies buried in strange places and needs to be found. Such was the case in the time of Josiah when the Book of the Law “got lost” for a long time and then happened to be discovered (2 Kings 22:8-20). The overwhelming irony is that it was discovered in a most unsuspecting place—the house of the Lord! Upon reading it the people learned that they had not been doing according to the Lord’s will. There are many churches where that needs to happen again today.

The Pearl of Great Price

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it (Matt. 13:45, 46).

Pearls have always had a special place in the hearts of men and women. There was a time when parents gave the name of “Pearl” to their daughters. The gates of heaven are said to be made of pearl (Rev. 21:21). Looking at a beautiful pearl brings joy. And possessing pearls often makes one admired because of their value. Merchants would search

the markets of the world to find that one pearl whose beauty surpassed all others.



A pearl is produced as the result of an injury suffered by a living organism, such as an oyster. It is caused by a foreign substance, such as a grain of sand. One grain of sand is not very beautiful to look upon but the living organism spreads matter over it until gradually a lovely

pearl is produced. Out of what was unlovely, something lovely is formed. Out of much suffering a beautiful object is produced. That which caused offensive pain became a lovely thing. How appropriate to describe the fact that the church, made up of those who were unlovely and had caused much suffering and pain were covered over and made beautiful by the blood of the one who was wounded!

Just as a pearl was regarded as the loveliest of all possessions, the kingdom of heaven is the loveliest thing in the world. To be in the kingdom is to submit to the will of the king and to enjoy kingdom benefits that are not available outside the kingdom. One who truly recognizes the value of the kingdom will not look on kingdom responsibilities as drudgery, but as something lovely. It is the supreme loveliness that can be found nowhere else. Nothing else will deliver genuine, ultimate and lasting peace and joy than to accept those kingdom responsibilities and benefits by doing the will of God.

Similarities and Differences These Two Parables

In each case the men recognized the value of what they had found. It has been said that some people stumble over the truth but they jump up and hurry off as though nothing had happened. There is obvious joy over the discoveries

of these two men. Each one put an estimate on the value of his discovery that caused him to *willingly* sacrifice all he had in order to obtain it. However, in the case of the treasure that man's discovery was serendipity. He had not been looking for it but found it accidentally. The man who found the great pearl had been actively seeking and searching for it. He knew what he was looking for.

Lessons

First, recognizing the worth of the kingdom means one has placed a high value on eternal things. Some, like the wayside soil, don't see the value of the spiritual and eternal. Second, when one truly recognizes this value, there will be joy, because nothing could be greater. Third, in recognizing the value of their discoveries, they were willing to give up everything (Matt. 16:24). The rich young ruler was unwilling to do this (Mark 10:17-22). To be in the Lord's kingdom and under his reign you will have to give up some of your time. It takes time to be a Christian. You may need to give up some of your possessions because some of them may be of a sinful nature and will keep you out of heaven. Some of them may have taken the form of idolatry in your life. You will need to give up some of your money because a certain amount of it is needed to carry on the Lord's work. You may have to give up worldly pleasures that are wrong and that will hinder your walk as a Christian. It might be giving up your objection to a simple but unpopular command, like baptism for the remission of sins. It could be your fear of responding to the invitation, giving up a popular denominational name, or some convenience. It may become necessary to drive farther in order to worship in spirit and in truth. *But God will make it worth it!* Whatever you give up—like these men in the twin parables—you will never find a better bargain (Prov.23:23).

Seek ye first the kingdom of God (Matt.6:33).

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The Parables of the Tares and the Dragnet

Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

Jesus often used different, but parallel, parables to illustrate and emphasize the same point of truth pertaining to his kingdom. The lost coin, lost sheep and lost son are examples of such parallelism (See Luke 15). All three parables teach the joy that is in heaven and ought to be on earth when a sinner repents and is rescued from sin.

The pearl of great price and the treasure in the field emphasize the great value of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 13:44-46). The mustard seed and the woman's leaven illustrate the wonderful growth of the kingdom from its small beginning (Matt. 13:31-33).

Likewise, the parables of the tares and the dragnet are parallel. They teach the same basic lesson that, in spite of the fact that Jesus came and brought salvation to the world, there will be those who do not accept the gospel and they will coexist with those who do until the end.

The Parable of the Tares

Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. So the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? From whence then hath it tares? He said unto them, An enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together

until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn (Matt. 13:24-30).

This parable is the second of two agricultural parables recorded in this chapter. The other one is the parable of the sower. The people in Jesus' immediate audience would have been very familiar with the scene of sowers sowing their seed in nearby fields. The parable of the tares answers some basic questions about good and evil in the world. What are the origins of each? Will good ever finally triumph over evil, if so when? Why do godly people have to live out their lives along side ungodly people? In order to get some insight into these questions, let us look at the components of this parable.

The Wheat and the Tares

According to Thayer, the tare was "a kind of darnel, resembling wheat except the grains are black." This explains why they both could have grown together undetected until "the blade was sprung up" (v. 26). The tare was so similar to wheat

that one would not likely notice the difference until the grain appeared. This also explains part of the difficulty of separating the two. They looked so much alike that mistakes could easily be made by those unqualified to detect the difference, increasing the likelihood that wheat would be uprooted with tares by mistaken identity. Also, by the time the blade appeared their roots would be so intertwined that pulling one up without damaging the other would be nearly impossible. In his explanation of the parable (Matt.

The parable of the tares answers some basic questions about good and evil in the world. What are the origins of each? Will good ever finally triumph over evil, if so when?

13:36-43), Jesus said the wheat represents the “children of the kingdom” and the tares “the children of the wicked one” (v. 38).

The Two Sowers

The sower of the wheat is “the Son of God” (v. 37). The enemy that sowed the tares is “the devil” (v. 39). All the good in the world originates with God and all the evil with the Devil. It may be providential that, in our English language, we only have to drop one letter from “good” to spell “God” and one letter from “devil” to spell “evil.” Even after Jesus came and died for sin and ascended to his throne on high, Satan continues to sow his seed and produce his children in the same domain where the “Son of man” sows his seed and produces “children of the kingdom.”

The Field

The field is the world (v. 38)—the “kingdom” out of which “them which do iniquity” or “practice lawlessness” (NKJV) shall be gathered (v. 41). The word “kingdom” in reference to Christ is used in a narrow sense and a broad sense. In its narrow sense it is the same as the church (Matt. 16:18-19). It is used this way most of the time in the New Testament. It is used in this sense in the phrase “children of the kingdom” (v. 38). When used in this sense, the world is viewed as being divided into two kingdoms—the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of Satan. Those who voluntarily submit themselves to our Lord’s authority are delivered from the power of darkness (Satan’s dominion or kingdom) and translated into the kingdom of his (God’s) dear Son (Col. 1:13).

It is obvious that “his kingdom” in verse 41 has a wider application than the spiritual kingdom, the church. That kingdom is the world or the field out of which the tares (children of the evil one) are gathered. How can the world be referred to as “his kingdom”? As King, he not only has dominion or authority over the church, his spiritual kingdom (made up of those who voluntarily submit to his authority), he also has dominion or authority over heaven and earth, even over those who do not voluntarily submit to his authority (Matt. 28:18). When he became head of the church he also had “all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come” put under his feet (Eph. 1:20-21)

Jesus is “King of kings” (1 Tim. 6:15; Rev. 17:14). “King of kings” is used in the Old Testament to refer to the heads of the empires of Babylon and Persia who had subdued kings of other nations and made them their subjects (Ezra 7:12; Dan. 2:37). So, Jesus is King of kings in that he rules over all the kings of all the nations of the earth. It is out of this kingdom, the entirety of his domain, that he will gather the wicked and cast them into the furnace.

The Reapers

These are angels sent forth by the Son of man at the end of the world to gather up the “children of the evil one”—the offenders and the lawless—and cast them into the “furnace of fire” where “there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Only the Son of man is qualified to make the final call and with his holy angels carry out the sentence by casting the lost into that awful furnace. Any judgments that we are given responsibility to make, and we are given some to make (John 7:24; 1 Cor. 5:3, 12-13; 6:1-5), are at best preliminary and subject to human error. The judgment of the Son is both final and infallible. We must await that judgment until the end of the world. Like the “sons of thunder” who wanted to call down fire and destroy on the spot those who rejected Christ (Mark 3:17; Luke 9:54), we may want the problem of the evil doer disposed of here and now but God is more longsuffering and prefers to wait until the end of the world. He is longsuffering, not willing that any should perish, but that all come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). We should not equate the longsuffering of God with his approval. Just because God does not dispose of evil doers immediately does not mean that he will not do so eventually at the end of the world. We must not murmur against God for not immediately destroying the “children of the evil one.” Nor should we try to take things into our own hands and make it our business to “kill the infidels.”

The Parable of the Tares Abused

Just about every good thing that God has given man, he has managed to abuse it in some way. This parable is no exception. It is an abuse to use it to teach against church discipline as is sometimes done. The idea of those who so abuse the parable is that we should let the ungodly members of church coexist with the godly without making any judgments about their life styles or making any effort to separate them from the faithful by putting away from ourselves such wicked persons (cf. 1 Cor. 5:13). On the face of it, any application of a parable that flies in the face of other plain teachings of the Scriptures is a misapplication. Such an application as we have described flies in the face of plain teaching about church discipline (see 1 Cor. 5 and 2 Thess. 3). So, we can know that whatever it teaches it does not teach congregations to allow ungodly members to go undisciplined. Jesus condemned the church at Thyatira for its tolerance of an ungodly teacher in its midst after the woman had been given time to repent (Rev. 2:20ff).

It is also an abuse to use this parable as a proof text to argue that a child of God may so sin as to be eternally lost. This writer has heard it so used by brethren in debate with Baptist preachers. The argument is made that since those that were cast into the furnace were gathered out of “*his kingdom*,” it is possible for those in the Lord’s kingdom (the church) to so sin as to be eternally lost. Now while there are plenty of good passages that teach that children of God (or “children of the kingdom”) can so sin as to be lost, this parable is not one of them. In this parable the “kingdom”

out of which the wicked are gathered is the “world” rather than the church (v. 38). It merely shows that we cannot expect the lost to be disposed of until the end of the world and any attempts on our part to so dispose of them would be a disaster. We are not qualified to do the rooting out; we must leave that to the experts, the Son of man and his angels. We must go ahead and preach the gospel to every creature (Mark 16:15) and it will *spiritually* separate those who obey it from those who do not (2 Cor. 6:17). But the complete *physical* separation will have to be deferred to the final day of judgment when the wheat (children of the kingdom) will gathered into the barn (heaven) to ever be with Lord (1 Thess. 4:13-18; Matt. 25:32-33) and the tares (children of the evil one) will be cast into the furnace of fire.

The Parable of the Dragnet

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind: Which, when it was full, they drew to shore, and sat down, and gathered the good into vessels, but cast the bad away. So shall it be at the end of the world: the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just, And shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 13:47-50).

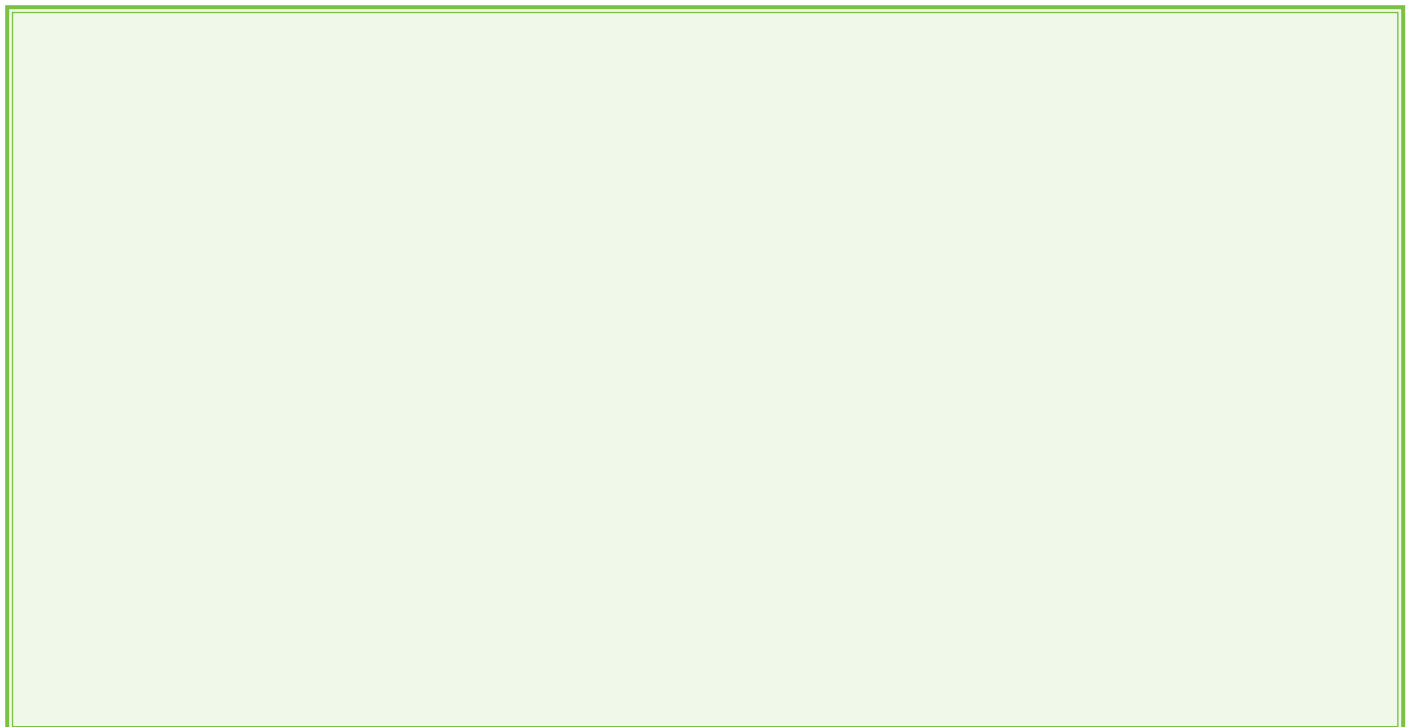
This parable teaches the same basic lesson as the parable of the tares, only more briefly. Rather than the world being the field of a farmer, it is the dragnet of a fisherman. It gathers all kinds of fish that must be sorted out once they reach the shore (v. 48). It would not be wise for the fishermen to try to sort out the good from the bad as they went. It would

be a waste of their time, energy, and resources. They wait until they reach the shore and then they can be carefully divided, with the good being kept and put into the fishing vessel while the bad are thrown away. Again, the Lord says this is how it will be at the end of the world (vv. 49, 50) when angels will come forth and sever the wicked from the good and cast the wicked into the furnace of fire.

Let us, as servants of the Lord, go forth with the gospel with confidence that it has the power to save men and women and to *spiritually* separate them from “the children of the wicked one.” As children of God they are given the responsibility to keep themselves so separated (cf. Acts 15:29; 1 John 5:21). Let us encourage congregations to deal lovingly and firmly with the leaven in their midst by properly withdrawing for every brother who walks disorderly and not after the tradition received of the apostles (2 Thess. 3:6). But also, let us remind ourselves that the problem of saints having to live along side sinners in the world will not be disposed of until the Lord comes again to gather his wheat harvest into the barn and to burn the tares—to gather the good fish into the vessel and throw out the bad.

It is not our venue to try to separate the wheat from the tares by taking vengeance on them that know not God and obey not the gospel; that is the job of the One appointed to execute judgment on the appointed Day (2 Thess. 1:8; Acts 17:31).

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The Good Samaritan

Luke 10:25-37

Russell Dunaway

The parable of the Good Samaritan was part of Jesus's method of dealing with one man, a lawyer. The name of that man is not given. All that we are told about him is that he was a lawyer. A lawyer (*nomikos*) is also referred to in the New Testament as a scribe (*grammateus*) or a teacher (*didaskalos*). No provision was made for this class of people in the Law of Moses. It appears that they emerged during the time of the return from Babylonian captivity under the leadership of Ezra and Zerubbabel. By the first century AD, they had become a well established order. Their job was to read from the Law and to give its meaning. Thus, they were the interpreters of the Law. By the time of Christ their duties involved studying and interpreting the Law, giving instruction in the Law, deciding questions about the Law, and interpreting and applying the Jewish traditions which had been imposed upon the Law. Thus, a lawyer was a man with a great deal of knowledge about the Law of Moses.

In Luke 10:25, "a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted" Jesus. The word here rendered "tempted," according to Strong, means "to test thoroughly." Though many attempts to entrap Jesus are recorded in the gospel records, there is no real evidence here that this was such an attempt. Rather, it seems that this lawyer was asking a question that would fully reveal the mind of Jesus. He was testing the knowledge of Jesus to the fullest extent possible.

The question asked by this lawyer is the most important question any man can ever ask, i.e., "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" This is the greatest question in the entire world. It is that which was asked by those in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:37), by Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:6), and by the Philippian jailor (Acts 16:30). A man is wise indeed to seek out the answer to this question. No greater or more important question can be asked. It is a question that any man from any walk in life should ask. The question implies that not everyone is going to be saved. It implies that the promise of eternal life is a conditional promise. It implies that a man must do something to attain eternal life.

We might also note that this man came to the right source with his question. He came to Jesus. He could have come to no higher source of authority for the answer. Jesus has "the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). When confronted with a question of a spiritual matter, all would do well to turn to him who came that we "might have life" to find the answer (John 10:10).

In responding to this lawyer, Jesus simply turned the question back to him. This man was a lawyer. He was a man trained and educated in the Law of Moses. He was a man responsible for answering difficult questions about the Law and how it was to be applied. So Jesus turns the question back to this lawyer, asking, "What is written in the Law? How readest thou?" This is the question that men need to ask whenever confronted with a question about any religious doctrine or issue. We must go to God's word for the answer. God's word is sufficient to answer every religious question and to resolve every religious issue. We cannot rely on human reasoning for the correct answer. Nor can we rely on our personal feelings. Rather, we must rely on the inspired Scriptures which are able to make us "wise unto salvation" (2 Tim. 3:15-17).

The lawyer responded, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with thy entire mind; and thy neighbor as thyself." This lawyer gave the correct answer. He knew the Law, and gave a correct summary of the Ten Commandments, quoting from Deuteronomy 6:5; 11:13; and Leviticus 19:18. To inherit eternal life we must love God with our entire being, and we must love our neighbor as ourselves. This is, in fact, the same answer that Jesus himself gave to another lawyer on another occasion (Mark 12:29-33).

From this answer, we know that this Lawyer had a good understanding of the Law and its meaning. Jesus declared that the lawyer had answered correctly. Then Jesus added, "This do, and thou shalt live." "This do," which translates

touto poiei, is present active and means “continue doing.” It was not enough for the lawyer to know what the Law said. It was also essential that he obey that law. Eternal life is conditional. To gain eternal life we must obey God’s divine law (Matt. 7:21-27).

No doubt the lawyer was not anticipating this answer. Seeking to justify himself, the lawyer asked a second question, “Who is my neighbor?” He correctly understood the teaching of the Law. But when commanded to act accordingly, he sought “to justify himself.” Here we are shown the flaw in this lawyer’s character. He was attempting to ease his mind about the importance of obedience to the Law. Notice too that his question was not about loving God, but about loving a neighbor. Exactly who is my neighbor? Obviously the lawyer was trying to extricate himself from some sort of a dilemma.

In response, Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-35). I have here called this a parable, yet I must point out that Jesus never called it a parable. He may have been citing a historic incident that had actually happened. In either case, however, the lesson to be learned is the same!

Jesus said, “A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.” We are told nothing of the identity of this man. We are not told whether he was a Jew or a Gentile. We are told nothing of the reason for his venture from Jerusalem to Jericho. We are not told whether he had been to Jerusalem to worship, or to conduct business, or for pleasure. The nature of his travel is not stated. The fact is, so far as the lesson being taught is concerned, these things really did not matter. What did matter was the fact that he was a human being who had been beaten, wounded, stripped, robbed, and left to die.

According to Jesus, this man “went down from Jerusalem to Jericho.” Jerusalem was about 2300 feet above sea level. Jericho was about seventeen miles from Jerusalem, and was about 1100 feet below sea level. According to George A. Buttrick, “the twenty miles between the two cities wound through mountainous country, whose limestone caves offered ambush for ‘brigand bands,’ and whose sudden turns exposed the traveler to unforeseen attack. The road became known as the ‘Bloody Pass.’ Many among Jesus’ hearers had traveled it.”¹

As this man made his journey, he “fell among thieves.” We are not told how many thieves there were, nor are we told anything about their race. All we know about them is that they were mean, brutal, selfish men. Seeing this traveler, they stripped him of his clothes, beat and wounded him, robbed him, and left him by the road “half dead.”

Unquestionably things like this often happened on that road. How uncertain the course of life is. Troubles and trials may arise at any time without warning. Many times the problems people face are not problems of their own creation. Many times suffering is brought on by others who are evil and malicious. Such was the case for this traveler. He happened to come to the wrong spot at the wrong time as he journeyed.

As Jesus continued, three men are brought into focus. The first was a priest. Jesus said, “And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.” Based on the geography of the region, this priest was traveling in the same direction as the man who had been beaten and robbed. The priest was a servant of the Law. He was a man who should have known the teaching of the Law. The Law demanded that mercy be shown even to a farm animal (Exod. 23:4-5). God has stated, “I will have mercy, and not sacrifice” (Hosea 6:6). Yet, the Lawyer it seems had failed to grasp what God meant when God made that statement. In passing by on the other side without stopping even to give aid to the wounded, dying traveler, this priest, like the Pharisees, had “omitted the weightier matters of the Law.”

Next, there came along a Levite. Jesus said, “And likewise a Levite, when he was at that place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side.” Though not a priest, this traveler was of the priestly tribe. The Levite was curious enough to go look at the man who was wounded, but he was not moved with compassion to render assistance to this unfortunate traveler. Like the priest, this Levite was indifferent to the needs of the wounded man. Rather than giving aid or assistance to the wounded man, the Levite too passed by on the other side, leaving the man bleeding, naked, and helpless.

Still, a third man came along. He was a Samaritan. Jesus said, “But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, and went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine; and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him.” The only one who stopped to help the wounded traveler was a Samaritan.

The fact that the only person who gave assistance to the man that was beaten and robbed was a Samaritan compels us to take notice of who the Samaritans were. Samaria was the name of the capital city of the Kingdom of Israel, the kingdom made up by the tribes that were separated from Judah in the rebellion of Jeroboam (1 Kings 12). Over the course of time the term “Samaria” came to be used as a synonym for the entire northern confederacy. From its very beginning, the northern kingdom had sustained a continued course of rebellion against God’s authority. Thus, God raised up the Assyrians in judgment of the northern

kingdom of Israel (2 Kings 17). Samaria was overcome by the Assyrians in 721 B.C. In keeping with Assyrian practice, the people of Samaria were removed from Samaria and relocated in other areas of the Assyrian empire, and people from other nations were placed in Samaria (2 Kings 17:24). These people made gods of their own and served them in Samaria, while also attempting to serve Jehovah (2 Kings 17:28-33). To make matters worse, some of the Jews returned to Samaria and intermarried with the Assyrians, creating a mixed race of people that became known as the Samaritans (2 Kings 17:34, 41). Because of their mixed ancestry, they were despised by the Jews. By Jesus' day, there was an intense feeling of animosity between the Jews and Samaritans. According to John 4:9, the Jews would have no dealings with the Samaritans. Yet, in this narrative, the only person who lent aid to the man that had fallen among thieves was a Samaritan.

No doubt, this Samaritan was just as busy as the priest and the Levite. Seeing the wounded man, however, the Samaritan was moved with compassion. He sympathized with the beaten man. He had pity on the man. His compassion led to action. He bound up the man's wounds, pouring in oil and wine to sanitize the wounds and to aid in the healing of them. He placed the man on his own beast, brought him to an inn, and there cared for the man. The Samaritan was the only one of the three willing to inconvenience himself in order to aid the victim of this vicious crime. He set aside his personal plans and concerns in order to care for this injured man. Not only did he provide the man with immediate aid, but Jesus added that "on the morrow when he departed, he took two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee." Now two pennies might not sound like much in modern terms, but in Bible times, a pence would be equivalent to a full day's wages for an agricultural worker (Matt. 22:19). Two pence, then, would equal two day's wages. From that perspective, we understand that this Samaritan was very generous and willing to sacrifice in his effort to care for the man that had been beaten and robbed. What is more, all these acts of compassion were performed, or so it appears, without any thought of recompense or reward. This Samaritan took time to care for the injured man. He put himself to the inconvenience of walking while the injured man was carried. He gave personal attention to the man in need. He spent his money on the unfortunate traveler. Are not these the very things that we most often tend to excuse ourselves from doing?

The key to the difference between the ministering Samaritan and the merciless priest and Levite was that when the Samaritan saw the wounded man, "he had compassion on him." The difference was not in the degree of the man's need. It was not in the opportunity to help. It was not in the awareness of the situation. Rather, it was in the

Samaritan's sense of mercy and the active concern that he took in the welfare of the injured man. The Samaritan saw the needs of this wounded man and then took the time and effort to meet those needs as best he could. Far too often we see those in need but fail to take action in order to help them. And if it is important to show compassion on those who are suffering physically, how much more should we be moved with compassion to help those who are lost and dying spiritually?

Having related the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus asked the lawyer, "Which of these three . . . was neighbor to him that fell among the thieves?" The lawyer had been trying to avoid the responsibility placed upon him by the law. He knew what the law said, but was seeking to justify himself in not doing what he knew the Law taught.

The lawyer responded, "He that showed mercy on him." Once again, the lawyer had the right answer. And Jesus quickly replied, "Go, and do thou likewise."

What a picture. What a parable. What does it teach? Among other lessons, this parable teaches that it is not enough to merely know what the Law of God teaches. To have eternal life, we must learn what God's will is, and then we must put it into practice in our life. We must be "doers of the word, and not hearers only" (Jas. 1:22). Jesus said, "Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of Heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21). The Lawyer knew what the Law of God said. His flaw was not in having a lack of knowledge, but in failing to do what the Law said to do. Jesus is "the author of eternal salvation to all them that obey Him" (Heb. 5:8-9). John wrote, "Blessed are they that keep His commandments" (Rev. 22:14). If you want to receive eternal life, you must learn what God's will is, and then you must do it. James admonishes us to "be doers of the word, and not hearers only" (Jas. 1:22).

Furthermore, the parable teaches that in order to receive eternal life we must become servants to those in need. We must have compassion on those in need, and that compassion must manifest itself in our actions toward them. It is not enough to say that we love others. We must demonstrate that love by our actions toward them (1 John 3:18). We all have a primary responsibility to provide for our own families (1 Tim. 5:8). We also have a responsibility to fellow Christians (Gal. 6:10). But that does not eliminate our obligation to care for the needy in general, as we have the ability and the opportunity to do so. Paul wrote, "And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all, especially unto them who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:9-10). James Montgomery Boice observed that, "We are not true followers of Christ until we are ready to give whatever is needed, and at personal cost. In short,

Parables of the Friend At Midnight and The Persistent Widow

Johnie Edwards

The Parable of the Friend at Midnight

Please begin this study by reading the parable as recorded in Luke 11:5-13.

The Lord had just responded to a request of his disciples, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1-4). He then provided them with a model prayer for their day and time.

Jesus Tells a Story

To alert early disciples concerning prayer, Jesus relates a story of a midnight request of a friend for three loaves of bread. An unexpected guest stopped in and having nothing to set before his friend, the man goes to a friend to borrow three loaves (Luke 11:5-6). Most people were in bed sleeping at this midnight hour. So the first response was, “I cannot not rise and give thee” (Luke 11:7). The bread-beggar, without shame, keeps asking till his friend “will rise and give him as many as he needeth” (Luke 11:8).

Perseverance Pays Off

Since the friend in this parable responded because of persistence, just think how God, a friend of Christians, will respond when we persevere in prayer!

The Bible teaches perseverance in prayer. Writing the Ephesian Christians, Paul penned, “Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all *perseverance* and supplication for all saints” (Eph. 6:18). Paul put it this way to the Romans: “. . . continuing instant in prayer” (Rom. 12:12). Not willing to give in or up, persistence demands that one “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17); that is, he keeps on praying. Since Christians “have a Master in heaven, continue in prayer” is required (Col. 4:1-2). May we never forget, “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (Jas. 5:16).

Ask, Seek and Knock

Jesus stressed three things to do, as his people make requests of God.

1. Ask: First, he said, “And I say unto you, *Ask*” (Luke 11:9). Sometimes, we don’t have because we don’t ask. It is written, “ye have not, because ye ask not” (Jas. 4:2). When James discussed getting wisdom, he penned, “If any of you lack wisdom, let him *ask of God*, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given

it is only our feeding the hungry, our giving drink to the thirsty, our receiving the stranger, our clothing the naked, our caring for the sick, and our visiting the prisoners that shows us truly to be Christ’s disciples (Matt. 25:34-36). Those things do not make us disciples, but their absence clearly shows that we are not.”²

Finally, Jesus made the application of this narrative for us, saying, “Go, and do thou likewise.” The value of the lesson lies only in the application of it in our own lives. Jesus never intended this narrative to be merely an illustration of

what it means to be a good neighbor. Jesus intended it to be an appeal to imitation. “Go, and do thou likewise.”

Footnotes

¹ George A. Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishing, 1928) 150.

² James Montgomery Boice, *The Parables of Jesus* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983) 154.

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him” (Jas. 1:5). Not only must we ask, but James also wrote, “But let him *ask in faith*, nothing wavering. For he that wavers is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord” (Jas. 1:6-7). In our asking, we better not “ask amiss, that you may consume it upon your lusts” (Jas. 4:3). In addition, John said, “And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight” (1 John 3:22). Meeting God’s prayer requirement, necessitates the request is according to his will (1 John 5:14); in the words of Jesus, “Ask, and it shall be given you” (Luke 11:11). Even though God “knoweth what things ye have need of before ye ask Him” (Matt. 6:8), he still wants us to ask, even at midnight!

2. Seek: “Seek, and ye shall find” (Luke 11:9). To seek, is to search for, as looking for one who is lost. We need to be seeking the lost. Sometimes, we sing, “*Seeking The Lost.*” Maybe we never save any lost because we fail to seek after them! After Jesus discussed, instead of worrying and fretting about things of this life, he stated, “But *seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness*; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matt. 6:25-34). As we put the church first, along with God’s righteousness, which is his commandments (Ps. 119:89), in our lives, we will be in a better position to petition God for our needs. As Paul wrote the Colossians, “If ye be risen with Christ, *seek those things which are above*, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God” (Col. 3:1). As seekers of “above things” we will, “Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth” (Col. 3:2). To find, we must keep on seeking!

3. Knock: “*Knock*, and it shall be opened unto you” (Luke 11:9). Sometimes things are not opened unto us because we do not knock. Jesus said, “to him that knocketh it shall be opened” (Luke 11:10). The midnight friend may have knocked a while to awaken his friend. After Peter’s prison release, he went to Mary’s house and knocked at the gate door, but Rhoda was so glad to hear Peter’s voice that, instead of opening the door, she ran and told others. But Peter persistently “continued knocking: and when they had opened the door, and saw him, they were astonished” (Acts 12:5-16). His persistent knocking paid off! Often, folks pass up opportunities to be in the Lord, because as Jesus knocks, they fail to listen. “Behold I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me” (Rev. 3:20). Knock and the door will be opened!

God’s Gifts: The Best Of All

A father would not think of giving his son a stone, a serpent or a scorpion, if he ask for bread, fish, or an egg (Luke 11:11-12). Jesus then contrasted men with God, by saying: “If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto

your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him” (Luke 11:13). The best gifts come from God. James put it this way: “Every good gift and perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning” (Jas. 1:17). The gifts of God are many. To mention a few: there is God’s “grace” (Eph. 2:8); “the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38); “eternal life” (Rom. 6:23); God “gave His only begotten Son” (John 3:16); an inspired book (1 Tim. 3:16) and the list goes on! We have to keep on asking to keep on getting, keep on seeking to keep on finding, and keep on knocking for an open door!

Parable of the Persistent Widow

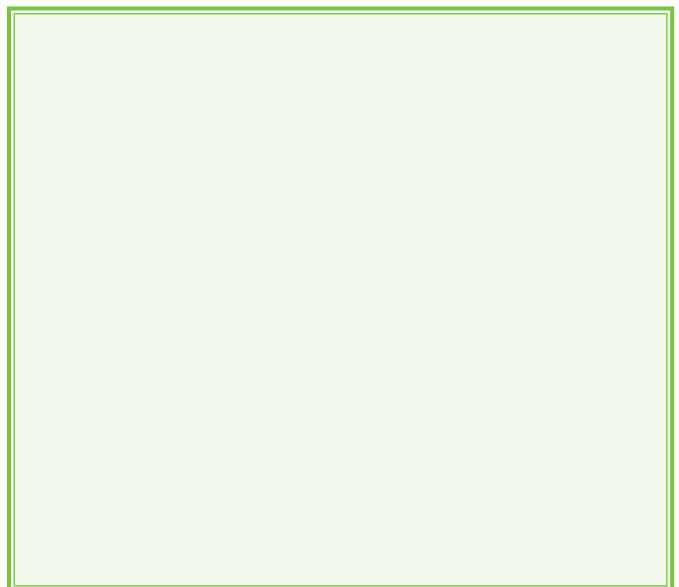
The parable of the “Persistent Widow” is found in Luke 18:1-8. You will get more out of this study if you will first read the Bible account a number of times.

To encourage men to pray, Jesus taught this parable. “And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint” (Luke 18:1).

Persons in the Parable

The people in this parable are a judge, a widow, the elect and God. Let’s take a look at each of these:

1. The Judge: Cities during the law of Moses had judges to administer justice among the people (Exod. 18:21-22; Deut. 16:18). These judges were commanded to “judge the people with just judgment.” According to 2 Chronicles 19:6-7, these men were told, “Take heed what ye do: for ye judge not for man, but for the Lord, who is with you in the judgment. Wherefore now let the fear of the Lord be upon you; take heed and do it: for there is no iniquity with the Lord our God, nor respect of persons, nor taking of gift.” The city judge in this parable “feared not God, neither re-



The Parable of the Rich Fool

Luke 12:13-21

Harold Fite

Against the backdrop of a multitude numbering thousands, Jesus warned his disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees, and charged them not to be afraid of those who would be hostile to them. In the course of his exhortation, he was interrupted by one of the multitude, who asked him, "Teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me." The question the man asked had no connection with what Jesus was teaching. Obviously, the inheritance dominated his thoughts.

We don't know the particulars of this inheritance, relative to customs, laws, nor the legal and moral aspects of it. We don't have to know to ascertain Jesus' point. Jesus refused to be drawn into the controversy. "Man, who made me a judge and divider over you," he replied. The Lord's purpose was above being an arbitrator in secular matters.

He used this occasion, however, as an opportunity to teach a lesson on "covetousness," and to warn against it.

A simple definition of "covetousness" is "greedy or unlawful desire for something." Jesus expressed the true philosophy of life, by saying, "A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth." A successful life is not based on things. Jesus used the parable of the rich farmer to illustrate this point.

The rich man had enjoyed a plentiful harvest, so much so he had no place to store it. To resolve the problem, he said, "I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there I will bestow all my grains and my goods." He then looked forward to retirement: "I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine

garded man" (Luke 11:2). He even boasted concerning his attitude (Luke 11:4). At first, he was not willing to listen and help her, but due to her persistence, he gave in and granted her request.

2. A Widow: "And there was a widow in that city; and she came unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversary" (Luke 18:3). This woman needed relief, of some sort, from an adversary's oppression. This widow was said to "trouble" the judge, as "her continual coming she weary me," he said (Luke 18:5). Her persistent pleading eventually paid off. Her attitude teaches us, ". . . not to be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not" (Gal. 6:9).

3. The Elect: Luke, by the way who is the only one who records the parable of "The friend at midnight" and "the Persistent Widow," comments about the elect: "And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them. I tell you that he will

avenge them speedily. Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth" (Luke 18:7-8)?

The widow stands for the elect or the Lord's own people in this parable. God expects his own to have enough faith in him to trust him and continually ask of him. It's like Paul penned: "Be careful for nothing; but in every things by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God" (Phil. 4:6).

4. God: If persistence caused a wicked judge to grant the widow's request, how much more will a just God be moved to listen to the righteous, as we beg and plead with him for our needs. Listen to Peter's inspired words: "For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers: but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil" (1 Pet. 3:12).

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ease, eat drink, be merry.” “Thou fool,” God said, “this night thy soul shall be required of thee; and the things thou hast prepared, whose shall they be?”

There is no indication that this farmer had acquired his riches through dishonest or unethical means. All indications are that he acquired his riches through diligent and honest effort. He was a successful farmer! So, why does God call him a “fool”? What made this man a fool?

He never looked beyond himself. He “reasoned within himself.” He looked to his own resources and wisdom. There is no indication he shared his wealth with anyone. He was a self-centered individual. He “lived in a little world, bounded on the north, south, east, and west,” by self. His use of repeated pronouns confirms this, as well as confirming his inflated ego.

He never looked beyond this world. William Barclay tells the story of a conversation between a young and ambitious man and an older man, who knew life: “I will,” said the young man, “learn my trade.” “And then?” replied the older man. “I will make my fortune.” “And then?” “I suppose that I shall grow old, retire, and live off my money.” “And then?” “Well, I suppose that some day I will die.” “And then?” came the last penetrating question. The “and then” seemingly never entered the rich man’s mind. He was totally unprepared for death and eternity. He only thought of the here and now, and made no provision for the future. Millions have, and are making the same tragic mistake.

He trusted in his riches. His aspirations and dreams were dependent on the uncertainty of riches. Riches can disappear like the early morning fog: here today, gone tomorrow; wealth today, poverty tomorrow. Riches cannot prolong life, produce contentment, nor make one happy. The apostle Paul charged the rich not to “have their hope set on the uncertainty of riches” (1 Tim. 6:17). The man who trusts in riches is a fool in God’s sight. We must not love the world, “neither the things that are in the world” (1 John 2:15). “While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:18). The real things of value are of eternal nature. Work for those things that last forever, “laying up treasures in heaven.”

He left God out of his life. The rich man’s life consisted of “my fruits,” “my barns,” “my grain,” “my goods,” “my soul.” Jesus taught, “A man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.” Apparently, the rich man never looked to the source of his agricultural blessings. He failed to recognize God from whom all blessings flow. It is God who “causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and the herb for the service of man: that he may bring forth food out of the earth” (Ps. 104:14). “He appointed

the moon for seasons; the sun knoweth his going down” (v. 19). Man cannot create nor destroy that which God has created. Man is dependent on God for the air he breathes, the water he drinks, and for the food he eats. Man simply uses what God has provided.

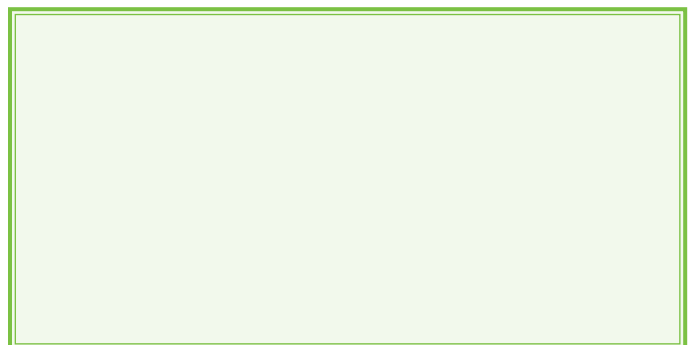
To live without God is to deprive oneself of the wisdom of God. Man is incapable of successfully directing his life through his own wisdom. “It is not in man who walks to direct his own path” (Jer. 10:23). The world through its own wisdom can never know God. “For the wisdom of the world is foolishness with God” (1 Cor. 1:20; 3:19). Without God he cuts himself out of the avenue of prayer, fails as an heir of all spiritual blessings in Christ, tragically “Having no hope, and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). One is foolish indeed, who leaves God out of his life.

His hope was based on an uncertain future. We have no promise of tomorrow. All we have is what we have now. We can plan for the future, but we don’t have the power to bring our plans to fruition. There are so many things that can thwart our well-laid plans, one of which is death. “For what we ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall both live, and do this or that” (Jas. 4:15). The future doesn’t belong to us. The rich man spoke as if he had control of the future. “Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow” (Jas. 4:14). “Boast not thyself of tomorrow, for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth” (Prov. 27:1).

The rich man lived without God and died without hope. He lived and worked for the things that pass with the passing of time. He should have worked for the things that last forever. Amidst the joy of a plentiful harvest and grandiose plans for the future, his soul was required of him. All his possessions would be left to another. “So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”

How often is this tragic story repeated in the lives of millions. Think! “For what shall a man be profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul” (Matt. 16:26). Do not be foolish like the rich man.

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The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree

Luke 13:1-9

Marc W. Gibson

Jesus used parables to teach spiritual truths. These parables were earthly stories that helped illustrate spiritual principles that we should understand. The parables of Jesus served to reveal or conceal truth, depending on our willingness to hear and understand (Matt. 13:10-17).

The people of Jesus' day were familiar with agriculture. Sowing and reaping were common activities of life, and vineyards were found throughout the land of Israel. The parables of the Sower and the Tares brought these familiar concepts to the minds of the hearers, as well as the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard. This lesson will focus on the parable of the Barren Fig Tree (Luke 13:6-9), which also uses familiar agricultural themes to convey important spiritual lessons.

Before the Parable: Teaching the Need For Repentance

Jesus would fit a parable to the subject of his teaching and/or the needs of the audience. Luke 13:1-5 informs us of the topic at hand when Jesus taught the parable of the Barren Fig Tree. Jesus was informed by some present at that time about the tragic incident of Pilate mingling the blood of some Galileans with their sacrifices (v. 1). Jesus discerned that they believed that these Galileans were worse sinners because this tragedy happened to them. He refuted this thinking, saying, "I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (v. 3, NKJV).

Jesus then added another tragic incident of his own. The tower of Siloam had fallen and killed eighteen people. Were they to suppose that "they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem" (v. 4)? Again Jesus admonished, "I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (v. 5). Jesus wanted the people to understand that it was wrong to think that some sinners need to repent more than others. All men "have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). All who sin need to repent, and if a sinner does not repent, he will perish. The wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23), and forgiveness is man's only hope. God is "not willing that any should perish

but that all should come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9b). God will forgive, but only if man will repent.

The audience that Jesus is teaching is also important to the interpretation of the parable. It was a Jewish audience that should have been concerned about the condition of their nation before God. It was to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" that Jesus focused his message (Matt. 10:6; 15:24). The parable discussed in this lesson will have a particular application to the Jewish people.

Examining the Parable

The basic points of the parable are easy to recognize: A fig tree owned by a certain man has borne no fruit for three years. The man who owned the vineyard decided to cut down the fig tree. The keeper of the vineyard, though, asked to spare it one more year so that he could dig around it and fertilize it. If it still did not bear fruit, it would be cut down.

The specific application of the parable is to the nation of Israel, who is represented by the barren fig tree. Israel of old was pictured as a vineyard (Isa. 5:1-7), and the problem of barrenness was noted in the Jewish Scriptures (Jer. 8:13; Mic. 7:1). The three years of barrenness is the period of time that the nation had been unfruitful. One theory suggests that it is the literal three years of Jesus' ministry on earth. More likely it represents a longer time period of increasing unfaithfulness that culminated in the Jew's rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. Before Jesus began his work, John the Baptist was already condemning the sins of the people and using the same figure of a tree about to be cut down because of its barrenness:

Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. *And even now the ax is laid at the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire*" (Luke 3:7-9).

Three years would be sufficient time to judge the fruitfulness of a literal fig tree, and God had been sufficiently longsuffering toward his people. The barren tree of Israel was due to be cut down, but the keeper of the vineyard begs more time. If the owner of the vineyard is God, who is the keeper of the vineyard? Is it Jesus, the son of God, who begged forgiveness for those who rejected him in ignorance (Luke 23:34)? Perhaps, but the key point is that the longsuffering of God toward his hard-hearted people was extended once again, as it had so many times before (cf. Num. 14:11-20; Amos 7:1-6; *et. al.*).

The “extra year” allowed would be the period of time when the apostles went forth and preached the gospel to every creature, beginning with the Jew first (Rom. 1:16; Acts 13:46). The Jewish people had an opportunity to be saved by submitting to the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 10:1-4). The digging and fertilizing was accomplished by the preaching of the gospel through which Israel was offered the opportunity to repent and receive forgiveness of sins (Acts 5:31; 20:21).

The parable ends without informing us of whether the fig tree (Israel) bore fruit again and remained in the vineyard, or was cut down. Other passages and secular history inform us of the answer. Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem, saying,

If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation (Luke 19:41-44).

Jesus also prophesied that not one stone of the temple buildings would be left upon another in the coming destruction (Matt. 24:2ff). The Roman Empire’s war against the Jews (A.D. 68-70) culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem (described in Josephus’ *The Jewish War*) and the fall of the national state of Israel. The barren fig tree did not respond to the gospel “fertilizer” that was sent to give

it spiritual life. The Jews rejected the call to come into one body where there is “neither Jew nor Greek,” and all are one in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:14-16; Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11). The earthly Jewish nation was cut down, and now all men must seek to be a part of the church—God’s chosen generation, royal priesthood, holy nation, and special people in Christ (1 Pet. 2:9).

Lessons for Us Today: Repentance and Bearing Fruit

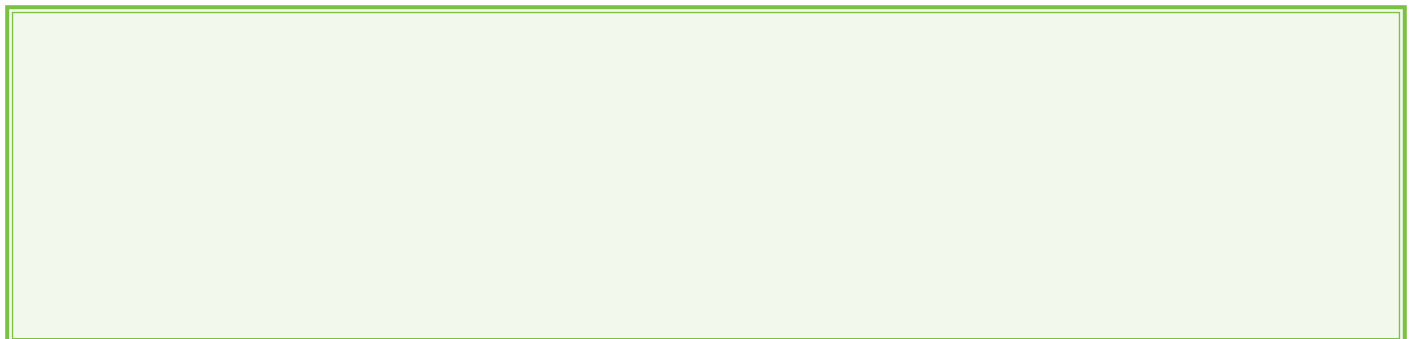
Though the specific application of the parable was to the Jewish nation of that day, the principles taught therein are important for God’s people today as well. We must realize that God “now commands all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). Repentance is part of God’s plan of salvation (Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 26:20). Godly sorrow for sin “produces repentance to salvation” (2 Cor. 7:10). Repentance is a change of mind, and the sinner must change his mind concerning living for sin and turn to God (1 Thess. 1:9). This change of mind must lead to obedience, or works befitting repentance (Matt. 3:8; Acts 26:20). If one does not repent of his sins, he will perish in his sins. The erring Christian must also repent of his sins or he will be lost (Acts 8:20-22; Rev. 2:5, 16; 3:19).

The bearing of fruit (good works) is a mark of a faithful disciple in the eyes of God (Rom. 7:4). Jesus described himself as the “true vine” and his disciples as “branches” (John 15:1ff). Jesus stated the situation simply:

Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away; and every branch that bears fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. . . . If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this my Father is glorified that you bear much fruit; so you will be my disciples (vv. 2, 7-8).

Each disciple will bear different amounts of fruit for the Lord (Mark 4:20), but each one who does bear fruit will receive an eternal reward. If one does not bear fruit, he will be cut off and cast into eternal punishment. It is vital that each Christian understand these principles and heed the word of the Lord.

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The Parable of the Dishonest Steward

Luke 16:1-13

Bobby L. Graham

Perhaps no parable has been doubted more as to its role in Jesus' teaching, because of the misperception that many have had of its point. In true shock some have frequently cited the master's commendation of the dishonest steward for his damnable effort in obtaining future comforts for himself. Why would Jesus thus commend a scoundrel? How could a parable of the Savior present such dishonest behavior in a good light? Others have sought to define the person(s) intended by Jesus as the counterparts of the parabolic characters, forgetting that this parable finds its chief instructive value in its major point of encouraging prudence in spiritual affairs among the redeemed, based upon its presence among the worldly-minded in their pursuit of their material goals. In both instances the parable has missed its target, for those at whom it was hurled have been unprepared to gain from its teaching.

The Context of the Parable

In the early verses of chapter 15 of Luke, Jesus was presented the opportunity to deal with the self-righteous proclamation of the Pharisees and scribes against Jesus' helpful association with publicans and sinners. "This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them." Following such a charge, the Savior then presented three parables to stress the love of God for the souls of lost people—sinners of the kind that the Pharisees and scribes disdained. To blunt their self-righteous attitude he spoke of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son.

Covetousness often accompanies self-righteousness, as it did in this instance. In fact, the self-righteous spirit often permits and even encourages covetousness. The two sections of chapter 16 (The Parable of the Unrighteous Steward and the Account of the Rich Man and Lazarus) were evidently intended by Jesus to reprove the covetousness of Jesus' critics. They must have needed a lesson in how to view and use their money.

The Story of the Parable

Jesus told about a steward (estate manager, household superintendent) who was facing a crisis in his job. The charge was made that he had wasted his master's goods. Was this a case of dishonest dealings on the manager's part? While he answered to no man except his master, he did have to account to him for how he handled his job. He could "see the handwriting on the wall."

Knowing that he would likely lose his position, he began to look out for his future welfare by ingratiating himself to those that he could influence. Unable to beg or work, for the reasons that he stated, he called in some of his master's debtors and reduced their debts, without the master's authorization. In this feat he was evidently following his old life of dishonesty, which had groomed him for the current effort. Note that he was not ashamed to steal, though he had claimed too much shame to beg.

The master later commended the steward's prudence in planning for himself. There is no indication of approval from Jesus for the manager's stealing. The master showed himself to be shifty and cunning by his commendation of the steward. Yes, the manager commending the scheme, the debtors cooperating in the scheme, and the master perpetrating the scheme were all rascals. Truly, "there is no honor among thieves."

Reminders to Help in Understanding the Parable

1. In explaining a parable, do not try to identify a counterpart for each character in the parable. Doing so has sometimes resulted in teachings contradictory within and without the parable. Use the same approach in understanding the various details (like those able to receive us into eternal dwellings); they are like window dressing, helping to draw attention to the main persons, ideas, and events.

2. Any lesson stressed by Jesus ought to have priority over any conclusion that you might draw. Harmonize any of your ideas with Jesus' statements, not visa versa.

3. Make sure you understand the words used in the parable—e.g. lord, steward, mammon.

4. In this particular parable, it is essential to remember that the commendation came from the master (“lord”) of the steward, not from the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus would not have commended such dishonesty. It is also important to notice what was commended—the steward's prudence.

5. Pay close attention to the lessons/principles at the end of the parable (16:10-13).

The Vision and Prudence That All Need

Jesus said, “For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their generation than the sons of light” (ESV). Though dishonest, the manager was exercising vision to prepare for his own future. He saw the need, devised a shrewd plan to meet the need, and worked to meet the need by enlisting others. The very ones benefiting from his dishonesty would later be able to assist him. Tiger Woods, Jose Canseco, and former President Clinton can teach us much about vision and prudence in earthly matters, though their methodology has not always been exemplary.

“Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.” Jesus' next counsel took the behavior of the steward in relation to mundane matters as being practical for those in the spiritual kingdom. All such can use this counsel in preparing for everlasting fellowship with God. Wise use of one's wealth does not allow it to be his master but makes it his servant in serving God and his

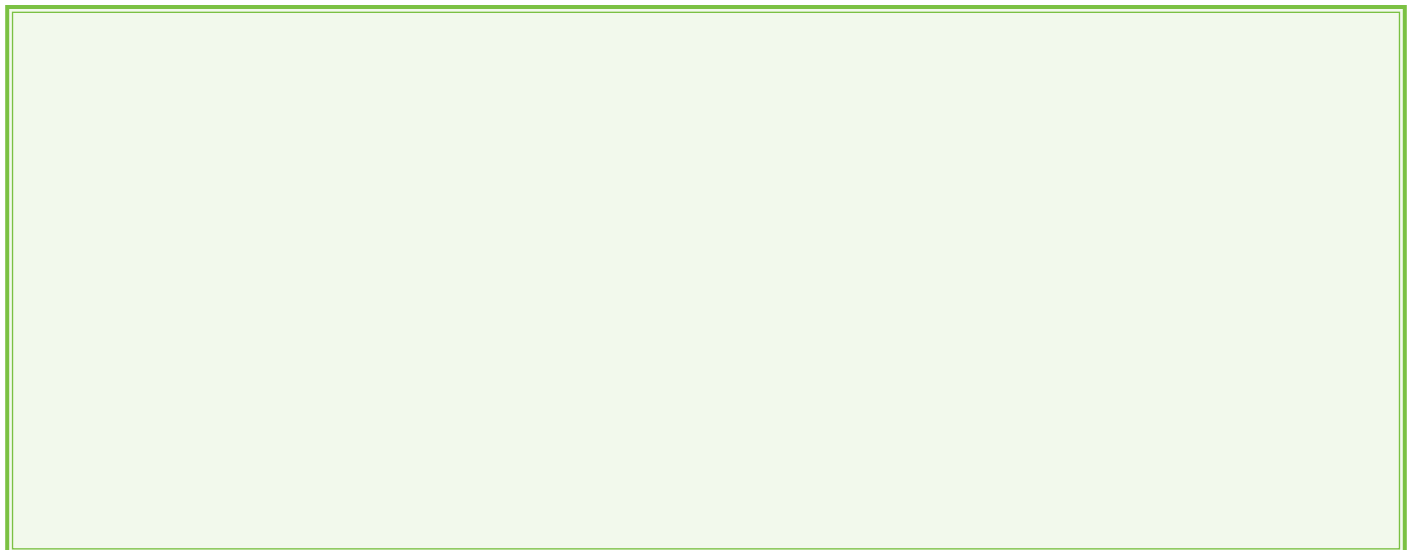
fellows of earth. Only by righteous use of one's money can money serve its God-intended purpose. It is here classed as “unrighteous” in verses 7 and 11, not because the money itself is tainted, but because it stands in contrast to “true riches,” the genuine wealth that awaits the faithful. The Lord desires that we use the vision, diligence, focus, intensity, and prudence shown so often by worldly-minded people in order to promote the gospel and the salvation of souls. Even “little” matters (unrighteous mammon, something belonging to another) serve as the proving ground for faithfulness in relation to “great” matters (true riches, your own).

Faithfulness to God demands that one choose him and serve him (v. 13). God and mammon are spiritually antithetical to each other. Either can claim one's heart and life by reason of the demands that each makes of him. It is not even possible to divide one's service to God and service to mammon. God demands one's whole heart, and Jesus said love must encompass the entire being (Matt. 22:37). The chief difference is that success in serving mammon depends on what one gains, whereas success in serving God depends on what one gives (devotes). How successful are you in serving him, based on what you give him?

The Final Accounting

Just as the dishonest steward was called to account by his master, so each of us will give account to the Christ who died to save him (Rom. 14:12). In the parable the characters were absorbed by wealth—getting and having, holding and spending. The Lord who used the parable has taught us to give what we have, to use it in his service. As servants of his, how are we doing? Have we grown in this area of life?

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“Parables” continued from front page

James Watkins wrote in *The Persuasive Person* (1987) that in its essence even the life of Christ became a sort of parable to those who walked and talked with him and observed his life:

... being able to visualize a message makes it more persuasive. When Christ became flesh and dwelt among us, He made abstract truth visible. We can't see God's balance of mercy and judgment. But we can see Christ saving an adulterous woman from stoning. We can't see man's lack of purpose without God. But we can see lost sheep. We can't see a loving, caring God. But we can see Christ crucified. Christ's life not only revealed God, but His illustrations put flesh on eternal truth. Rather than trying to explain faith, He pointed to mustard seeds and the hills of Galilee. Sin became visible as weeds and infectious yeast. Rather than preaching a five-point sermon on hypocrisy, Christ spoke of whitewashed tombs, filled with dead men's bones and everything unclean. Hypocrites were poisonous snakes. These “word pictures” pack more truth than thousands of words. We can see whitewashed tombs. We can smell putrid flesh.

God understood the human need to visualize these magnificent truths. That is why he sent Jesus to live and teach among the sons and daughters of men. And that is why Jesus utilized parables with such frequency in his teaching. One particular Yiddish folktale illustrates the power of the parable in explaining and representing the message of truth. It is, more or less, “a parable about the usefulness of the parable”:

Once upon a time, Truth went about the streets as naked as the day he was born. As a result, no-one would let him into their homes. Whenever people caught sight of him, they turned away and fled. One day when Truth was sadly wandering about, he came upon Parable. Now, Parable was dressed in splendid clothes of beautiful colors. And Parable, seeing Truth, said, “Tell me, neighbor, what makes you look so sad?” Truth replied bitterly, “Ah, brother, things are bad. Very bad. I am old, very old, and no one wants to acknowledge me. No one wants anything to do with me.” Hearing that, Parable said, “People do not run away from you because you are old. I too am old. Very old. But the older I get, the better people like me. I will tell you a secret: Everyone likes things disguised and prettied up a bit. Let me lend you some splendid clothes like mine, and you will see that the very people who pushed you aside will invite you into their homes and be glad of your company.” Truth took Parable's advice and put on the borrowed clothes. And from that time on, Truth and Parable have gone hand in hand together and everyone loves them. They make a happy pair (*Yiddish Folktales*, edited by Beatrice Weinreich, trans. by Leonard Wolf [New York: Pantheon Books, 1997]).

What Is A Parable?

A parable is an extended simile. A simile compares the

point of commonality (similarity, thus, simile) between two unlike things in order to demonstrate and teach that point. Therefore, a formal definition would be as follows: “A parable is a brief story that is true to life, comparing the point of commonality between two unlike things, given for the purpose of teaching spiritual truth.”

In the New Testament the word in Greek is *parabole*, meaning: “to cast alongside, a placing beside; a comparison.” The term is equivalent to the Hebrew noun *mashal*, meaning “a similitude.” In the Old Testament this word is used to denote:

- A proverb (1 Sam. 10:12; 24:13; 2 Chron. 7:20).
- A prophetic utterance (Num. 23:7; Ezek. 20:49).
- An enigmatic saying (Ps. 78:2; Prov. 1:6).

In the New Testament *parabole* refers to:

- A proverb (Mark 7:17; Luke 4:23)
- A typical emblem (Heb. 9:9; 11:19)
- A similitude or allegory (Matt. 15:15; 24:32; Mark 3:23; Luke 5:36; 14:7)
- Ordinarily, in a more restricted sense, a comparison of earthly with heavenly things, “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning,” as in the parables of our Lord.

Old Testament Parables

The Old Testament contains only five parables, corresponding to the definition here given, aside from a few symbolic stories, such as Ezek. 3:24-26; 4:1-4; and 24:3-5. These parables are as follows: (1) Of the poor man who had raised a single lamb which a wealthy neighbor took to set before a guest (2 Sam. 12:1-4); intended to illustrate the sin which David had committed with Bathsheba, Uriah's wife. (2) Of the wise woman of Tekoah, who induced David to make peace with his son Absalom (2 Sam. 14:6-8). (3) Of the prophet's disciple, showing Ahab the wrong course which he had adopted toward Ben-hadad (1 Kings 20:39-40). (4) Of the vineyard which does not thrive despite the care bestowed upon it (Isa. 5:1-6), illustrating Israel's degeneracy. (5) Of the farmer who does not plow continually, but prepares the field and sows his seed, arranging all his work in due order (Isa. 28:24-28); intended to show the methodical activity of God. All of these parables were based on conditions familiar at the time; and even the event described in 2 Sam. 14:6-8 was probably no rare occurrence, in view of the custom which then prevailed of avenging bloodshed.

Rabbinic Parables

Jewish Rabbis frequently used parables to illustrate their teachings. A large number of parables are found in post-Biblical literature, in the Talmud and Midrash. The Talmudic writers believed in the pedagogic importance of the parable, and regarded it as a valuable means of

determining the true sense of the Law and of attaining a correct understanding thereof (*Cant. R. i. 8*). Johanan ben Zakkai is said to have studied parables and fables side by side with the (Jewish traditional materials) Mikra, Mishnah, Halakah, Haggadah, etc. (*Baba Bathra* 134a; *Suk. 28a*), and Rabbi Meir is said to have divided his public discourses into Halakah, Haggadah, and parables (*Sanh. 38b*). In the Talmud and Midrash almost every religious idea, moral maxim, or ethical requirement is accompanied by a parable which illustrates it. Among the religious and moral tenets which are thus explained may be mentioned the following: the existence of God; his manner of retribution and of punishing sins both in this world and in the next; his faithful governance; his impatience toward injustice; his paternal leniency and his relation to Israel; Israel's sufferings; the folly of idolatry; the Law as the guardian and faithful protector in life; the sin of murder; the resurrection; the value of benevolence; the worth of a just man for his contemporaries; the failure of popularity as a proof of intrinsic value; and many others.

Rabbinic parables almost always begin with an introductory formula which parallels those found in the Gospels. Often the logic argues that "if such-and-such is true with men, how much more so with God." The length and structure of the rabbinic parables also resemble those of the parables of Jesus. The parables of Jesus and the rabbis further share common topics and imagery. "Judah the Prince used to cite this parable: To what is the matter like? To a king who possessed a vineyard which he handed over to a tenant . . ." "Rabbi Meir illustrated it by a parable. To what is the matter like? To a king who prepared a banquet and invited guests."

To further illustrate this practice among the Jews outside the Bible, we shall cite a few examples from the Jewish Talmud:

A pagan philosopher once asked Rabbi Gamaliel why God is angry with idolaters and not with idols, whereupon R. Gamaliel answered him with the following parable: "A king had a son who raised a dog which he named after his royal father; and whenever he was about to swear he said, 'By the life of the dog, the father.' When the king heard of this, against whom did his anger turn, against the dog or against the son? Surely only against the son" (*Ab. Zarah* 54b).

Emperor Antoninus asked Rabbi how there could be punishment in the life beyond, for, since body and soul after their separation could not have committed sin, they could blame each other for the sins committed upon earth, and Rabbi answered him by the following parable: "A certain king had a beautiful garden in which was excellent fruit; and over it he appointed two watchmen, one blind and the other lame. The lame man said to the blind one, 'I see exquisite fruit in the garden. Carry me there that I may get it; and we will eat it together.' The blind man consented

and both ate of the fruit. After some days the lord of the garden came and asked the watchmen concerning the fruit. Then the lame man said, 'As I have no legs I could not go to take it'; and the blind man said, 'I could not even see it.' What did the lord of the garden do? He made the blind man carry the lame, and thus passed judgment on them both. So God will replace the souls in their bodies, and will punish both together for their sins" (*Sanh. 91a, b*).

When Rabbi Hivva's son, Rabbi Abin, died at the early age of twenty-eight, Rabbi Zera delivered the funeral oration, which he couched in the form of the following parable: "A king had a vineyard for which he engaged many laborers, one of whom was especially apt and skilful. What did the king do? He took this laborer from his work, and walked through the garden conversing with him. When the laborers came for their hire in the evening, the skilful laborer also appeared among them and received a full day's wages from the king. The other laborers were angry at this and said, 'We have toiled the whole day, while this man has worked but two hours; why does the king give him the full hire, even as to us?' The king said to them: 'Why are you angry? Through his skill he has done more in the two hours than you have done all day.' So is it with Rabbi Abin ben Hivva. In the twenty-eight years of his life he has learned more than others learn in 100 years. Hence he has fulfilled his life-work and is entitled to be called to paradise earlier than others from his work on earth; nor will he miss aught of his reward" (*Yer. Ber. ii. 5c*). (Compare the similar parable of Jesus in Matthew 20:1-16).

Johanan ben Zakkai illustrates the necessity of daily conversion and of constant readiness to appear before God in heaven by the following parable:

A king invited his servants to a banquet without stating the exact time at which it would be given. Those who were wise remembered that all things are ever ready in the palace of a king, and they arrayed themselves and sat by the palace gate awaiting the call to enter, while those who were foolish continued their customary occupations, saying, "A banquet requires great preparation." When the king suddenly called his servants to the banquet, those who were wise appeared in clean raiment and well adorned, while those who were foolish came in soiled and ordinary garments. The king took pleasure in seeing those who were wise, but was full of anger at those who were foolish, saying that those who had come prepared for the banquet should sit down and eat and drink, but that those who had not properly arrayed themselves should stand and look on (*Shab. 153a*).

Similar parables expressing the almost identical thought of this last story are found in the teaching of Jesus in the New Testament (cf. Matt. 22:10-12; 25:1-12; Luke 12:36).

Hundreds of such parables as these are found in the rabbinic literature. A few bear some slight similarity to the parables of Jesus, most do not. Many of the moral princi-

pals are the same, and the teaching background or tradition within Judaism itself is obviously the same, so there are naturally going to be parallels.

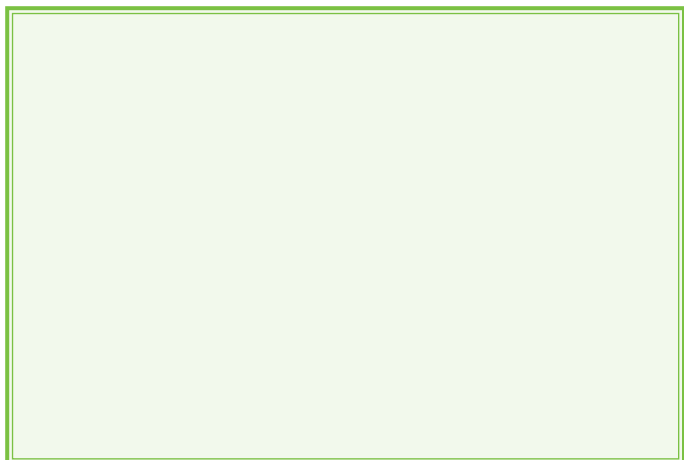
Jesus' parables were unlike the rabbis' in at least two major ways. The vast majority of the rabbinic parables staunchly reinforce conventional Jewish values, serving primarily to exegete Scripture. They thus stand in marked contrast to Jesus' often 'subversive' counterparts, which almost never refer back to God's written word, but gain their force from the personal authority of Christ. The parables of Jesus further distinguish themselves by their consistent reference to the kingdom of God.

One can also see from this comparison that the parables of Jesus are quite remarkable and truly unique in their perspective and content. Even though he used similar language and ideas, Jesus taught with authority (Matt. 7:29) and his parables are utterly timeless and clearly have become the most often repeated and most remembered in all of human history. Most of the rabbinic stories are only known to scholars. The parables of Jesus are known and loved by almost everyone. In that sense, they are assuredly in a class by themselves.

The Parables of Jesus

The most familiar aspect of the teaching of Christ is his use of parables. Matthew tells us that this was his major method of teaching: "Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: 'I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world'" (Matt. 13:34-5).

A large portion of our Lord's public teaching consisted of parables. He himself explains his rationale for this in his answer to the inquiry of the disciples, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" There are two specific reasons outlined in the Gospel accounts.



1. Jesus taught in parables because of the hardness of many hearts; thus, many truths of the kingdom were concealed from them. The Lord told the Twelve: "To you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but to those who are without, all these things are done in parables" (Matt. 13:13-15; Mark 4:11, 12; Luke 8:9, 10). In other words, the Lord spoke in parables because this teaching technique concealed certain truths from those who were merely looking for an occasion to destroy him and his work. He spoke more deliberately and plainly to his intimate few.

2. Jesus taught in parables because of the willingness of some to hear and obey; thus, many truths of the kingdom were revealed to them. Through these stories of everyday life, Christ provoked his disciples to think on a higher level. This is so because comparison of the "known" (earthly) truths with the "unknown" (heavenly) truths would shed further light on the unknown. Therefore, with the help of the Lord's explanation of his parables we can learn more about "the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" (cf. Matt. 13:34-35).

Theme of the Parables of Jesus

The general theme of the parables is the kingdom of God: "To you is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God" (Matt. 13:11). On a deeper level, the parables reveal three aspects of the kingdom.

First, they reveal a great deal about the character of the kingdom itself. The parable of the Mustard Seed tells us that it is small at the first, but will grow mighty with time. The parable of the Leaven explains that it permeates the hearts of men and society in general until it affects everything and everyone. The parable of the Hidden Treasure deals with the sacrifices necessary for one to possess the kingdom. The parable of the Pearl of Great Price emphasizes the unique worth and priceless value of the kingdom of God.

Second, they tell us many things about the character of the king. The parable of the Workers in the Vineyard reveals the extreme generosity and grace of the king. The parable of the Prodigal Son gives humanity a peek into the heart of God. Though he is the King of kings, still he is also a tender-hearted father who loves his children and is anxious to forgive them and restore them to the full benefits of his household, no matter how far they have wandered or how long they have stayed.

Third, they say much about the king's subjects. They tell us what kind of people they will be. The parable of the Good Samaritan says the subjects of the kingdom of God are people who reach out to others who are in need, just as good neighbors have always done. The parable of the Persistent Widow demonstrates the fact that

those who are part of the kingdom will pray persistently, even when things appear hopeless. This story also tells us that God is a heavenly judge who hears the prayers of his people.

How To Study a Parable

Two extremes of interpretation should be avoided by the student of the parables of Jesus. The first is having the desire to discover some spiritual truth in every small detail of the story. The second is the tendency to pontificate that there can only be one spiritual lesson in every parable. Some of the parables in point of fact have several very obvious lessons, although there is almost always a central message that is clear from the story. Several steps are important in properly analyzing and applying the lessons of the parables of Christ:

Begin with a study of the three essential parts of the parable: the setting, the story itself, and the spiritual message, as given in the Scriptures. Scripture is the best interpreter of Scripture, so a close look at the circumstances of the parable's delivery, including the near and remote context of the passage is important. Ignoring the context is a sure road to misunderstanding.

Learn about how parables are to be understood by studying the Lord's own explanation of those parables that he specifically "interpreted" in private for his disciples. The parable of the Sower and the Soils provides a perfect case in point (cf. Mark 4:13). Here Jesus gives us all that we need to know about that particular parable and its meaning. In addition, he also supplies us with a basic approach to the parables and how they are to be understood.

Observe three principles in finding the central message and learning from it without going beyond its limits: (1) Each parable has one, and only one, central message; (2) Each parable has a number of details that have a spiritual significance of their own, but all of these details also relate to the one spiritual message and ought to be read so that they are in complete harmony with the central message of the story; (3) Each parable has details that have no special spiritual significance whatever; they are like stage props that are employed to make the story more real. One must be careful not to push these incidental details beyond their intended meaning. Medieval commentators, for example, saw spiritual significance in every single detail of a parable. This leads to nonsense interpretation, which was precisely the product of their "allegorical" approach. For example, the prodigal son's robe was variously interpreted as standing for sinlessness, spiritual gifts, the imputation of Christ's righteousness, or the sanctity of the soul. Clearly all of these views recognized that the father gave the robe to the prodigal to indicate his restoration to the family. But it was impossible to agree on how to match the robe with one particular aspect of a new Christian's relationship with

his heavenly Father. Presumably the lesson to be learned is that the robe is not meant to be allegorized!

Parables are not a rich source of doctrinal teaching. Therefore, these stories ought not to be used to formulate new doctrines. We must be sure to remember that the first emphasis of these stories was to *conceal* certain truths from the public. Their message(s) do not always lie directly at the surface of the story. So, they are only appropriate bearers of doctrinal content when other more direct and literal passages may be marshaled to the defense of an idea.

The reader should contemplate all these things carefully and prayerfully and place the emphasis upon the application(s) to our own life and service to God. If a parable has no spiritual application to our own lives, then reading it is no different than reading a newspaper! The word of God is a mirror of our own souls, intended for learning and application (Jas. 1:22-25). When we read and study it, we see ourselves more clearly, with all of our bumps and blemishes, faults and foibles. This is no less true of the parables of Jesus.

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"The Sower" continued from p. 2

to germinate and grow but not enough for it to adequately root. Too little root means too little water. When the sun arose, the plant scorched and withered away.

Some fell on thorny soil. The thorns' presence was not evident at the time of sowing; however, that seed, too, was in the ground. Luke's account says the thorns grew up with the good seed. When they did, they choked it out. The hardness of weeds is no revelation!

The remainder of the seed fell into good soil. There it grew into a fruitful crop. Yet even in this circumstance not every plant was equally productive. Some yielded a hundredfold, others sixty, and others thirty.

These varying results were not due to any deficiency in the seed, neither were they a sign of carelessness on the part of the sower. They were the natural outcome of sowing seed over an extended area. That is precisely the lesson Jesus intended to convey about the word of the kingdom.

The Seed

The Parable of the Sower has three elements: the seed, the sower, and the soil. When the multitude departed, Jesus' disciples asked him to explain the parable. (Mark specifies that it was a broader number than just the twelve.) Jesus' explanation focused on the soil. That is, therefore, the main

point. But Jesus began by identifying the seed, so let us begin with that.

The seed is the word of God (Luke 8:11), the word of the kingdom (Matt. 13:19). A number of similarities between seed and God's word immediately come to mind.

Seed has life within it. "For you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding word of God" (1 Pet. 1:23). The wisdom of men cannot impart life. Only God's word can do that.

Seed produces after its kind (Gen. 1:11-12). The unadulterated word of God will consistently produce the same result. Something must be added or subtracted to yield a different product.

Seed produces fruit with seed in it. When we allow God's word to grow within us, the fruit that results has a natural tendency to spread the seed. "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16).

Seed must be planted in order to produce. Seed is only potential. As long as it is in the barn it will bear no fruit. Even when spread it must be absorbed. That is why James wrote, ". . . in all humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls" (Jas. 1:21). In other words, we must take it to heart.

The Sower

If the seed is the word of God, the sower is anyone who spreads the word. What an appropriate metaphor for the means of advancing God's kingdom. God does not coerce obedience. His kingdom is not advanced by military or political means (John 18:36). "The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh" (2 Cor. 10:4). No, the gospel is God's power to save (Rom. 1:16). His plan is that it be preached to all, giving all the opportunity to hear and obey it.

Initially, Jesus is the sower. But he is not the only one. The gospel preacher is a sower. So is the Bible class teacher. So is the brother who teaches his friends at work or the sister who passes out tracts.

Sowers must be busy sowing. They must work together, not become rivals (1 Cor. 3:5-9). And they must be patient (Jas. 5:7). This parable reminds us that not all sowing efforts meet with success. Even the seed in good soil takes time to grow. Some suggest that one of Jesus' objectives in this parable was to reassure the disciples in light of the frequent opposition to him.

The Soil

The focus of this story, however, is not on the seed or

the sower; it is on the soil. This is a story about hearers and how they respond to God's word. Jesus identified four kinds of hearers.

First, depicted by the roadside soil, is *the hard heart*. Some are too hard-hearted to even listen to the gospel. They are content in slavery to sin. Perhaps they arrogantly think they already know all the answers. Perhaps they are afraid of what they may learn, fearful they will discover that they are wrong and must change. Jesus had in mind one who hears but the word does not sink in. He may listen politely, but he does not understand it. He has little appreciation for it and gives it no more thought. Like an anxious bird, immediately the devil comes and takes it away.

Second, depicted by the rocky soil, is *the shallow heart*. Here is the man who readily receives the word, then just as readily gives it up. Why? He grows no roots. When affliction or persecution comes, he wilts. He is ready to do right if it is easy, but do not ask him to endure hardship. Luke's account says in time of temptation he falls away. The Lord might have added internal church problems to the list. They, too, have claimed their share of casualties.

The problem here is not necessarily shallowness of knowledge, though that is often the case; it is shallowness of conviction and commitment. Paul prayed that Christ would dwell in our hearts through faith; that we would thereby be rooted and grounded in love, with the result of being filled with God's fulness (Eph. 4:16-19). Trees put down deep roots. They do not plan to move. We must do the same.

Third, depicted by the thorny soil, is *the crowded heart*. This hearer is receptive and fertile. Unfortunately, the gospel must contend with lots of other plants. The devil has plenty of weed seed to sow in our hearts. In Mark's account, Jesus targeted three areas: the worries of the world (age), the deceitfulness of riches, and the desire for other things.

It is easy to get caught up in the concerns of our time and forget that we are just pilgrims here. We claim to know that money does not satisfy, yet who really thinks that less of it is better? Those "other things" do not have to be inherently wrong things. They may be jobs, families, good causes, and the like. But when we devote so much time and energy to them that there is little left for the Lord, the thorns thrive and the word wilts. Does your garden need weeding?

Fourth is the good soil, *the honest and good heart*. This is the productive hearer, the fruit-bearer. Interestingly, each account of the parable gives a slightly different explanation of what makes it so. Matthew 13:23 says the man hears the word and understands it. He thinks about what he is hearing. He meditates on it. He does what is necessary to

comprehend it. Mark 4:20 says he hears and accepts it. It becomes part of him, rather than “in one ear and out the other.” Luke 8:15 says he holds it fast and bears fruit with perseverance. He lives by its truths, day in and day out. He does not abandon it when the going gets tough. These together present the correct response to truth: understand it, accept it, and hold it fast.

Not all honest and good hearts are equally productive. No two Christians are exactly alike. The amount and kind of fruit we bear will vary. That variation is in part attributable to what extent we allow Christ to dwell in us. “He who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). “By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples” (v. 8).

The Sower and Calvinism

The Sower was intended to be a lesson on listening, not a rebuttal of false doctrine. Nevertheless, it does expose several errors of Calvinism.

Hereditary depravity. Calvinists believe that we are born with the guilt of Adam’s sin and a depraved nature. We are incapable of doing good or even accepting the gospel. Yet Jesus spoke of an “honest and good heart.” In the parable, this heart is not different than the others because of some direct operation of the Holy Spirit. What sets it apart is an individual’s own receptiveness to truth. One author rebutted that this heart is really bad too; it is only good in comparison to the other three! But how can that be if we are “wholly inclined to all evil,” as the Westminster Confession expresses it?

Unconditional election. Calvinism says God eternally decreed whatsoever comes to pass. That includes choosing which individuals will and will not be saved, choices made without regard to anything we do or fail to do. Then why did Jesus challenge his audience to listen? Why close with, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear?” If being a wayside, rocky, or thorny heart is all a matter of God’s doing, what responsibility did these listeners have?

Irresistible grace. This tenet says that if you are among the elect, God irresistibly imposes his favor on you, putting faith into your heart and making you a believer. But Jesus said the seed, the word of God, is the instrument by which faith comes. The sower sows the word of God. Why, if faith is directly implanted? In three of the four soils (hearts) the word was believed. The only one in which it was not was when “the devil comes and takes away the word from their heart, so that they may not believe and be saved” (Luke 8:11-12). How can what the devil does to the word prevent faith, if faith does not come through the word? If God directly implants faith into men’s hearts, nothing the devil does to the word can affect it.

Once saved, always saved. The doctrine of perseverance of the saints is that once one becomes a believer, once he is saved, he can never become an unbeliever or be lost. This story teaches the opposite. The rocky soil is those who “believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away” (Luke 8:13). Calvinists assert that they never really believed. They point out that the word *believe* is sometimes used of those whose faith is not saving faith. That is true (John 12:42; Jas. 2:19). But not so here. In verse 12, the belief under consideration is unmistakably saving faith: “believe and be saved.” There is no reason to make it anything else in verse 13, where some “believe for a while, and fall away.” These who fall away are in contrast to those who hold fast (v. 15).

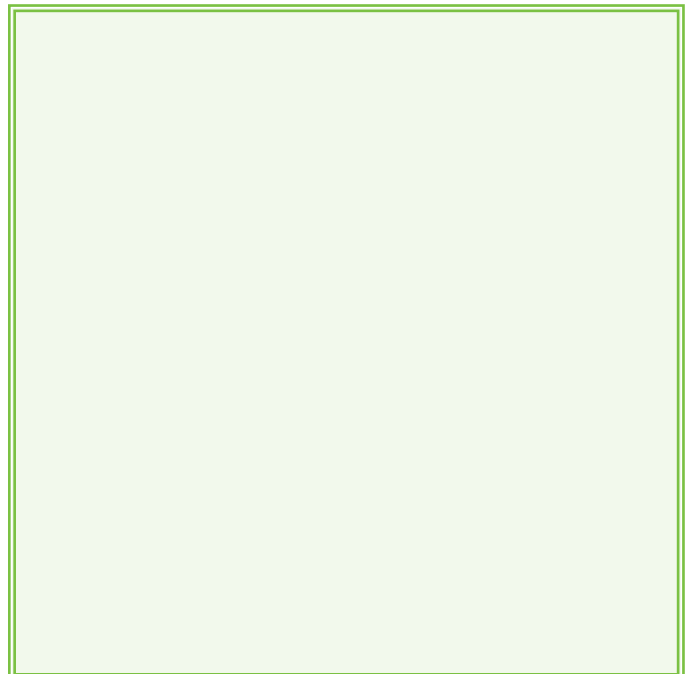
Regarding faith, Jesus presents three categories in this parable: those who never believe, those who believe for a while but fall away (either because of adversity or pursuit of other things), and those who hold fast and bear fruit with perseverance.

Conclusion

Each hearer determines what kind of soil best represents him. We could easily think of New Testament examples of each: Simon the Pharisee, Demas, the rich young ruler, etc. But nothing could be more out of place than to hear a parable about listening and apply it to someone else. Jesus intended that we see ourselves in these stories. The question you and I must answer is, “What kind of soil am I?”

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(This special on The Parables of Jesus will continue in the next issue of *Truth Magazine*.)





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