



BIBLE STUDY SERIES

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TABLE *of* CONTENTS

Lesson One	THE PARABLES OF JESUS	
	<i>Introduction to the Parables</i>	3
	<i>Salt & Light</i>	5
Lesson Two	THE GREAT VALUE OF THE KINGDOM	
	<i>Parable of the Hidden Treasures & Pearl of Great Price (Value)</i>	9
	<i>Parable of the Great Feast (Humility)</i>	12
Lesson Three	PRAYER AND THE WORD OF GOD	
	<i>Parable of the Widow and the Judge (Persistence)</i>	15
	<i>Parable of the Soil (Heart)</i>	18
Lesson Four	COMMITTING AND SHARING CHRIST	
	<i>Parable of the Great Feast (No Excuses)</i>	22
	<i>Parable of the Wedding Feast (Evangelism)</i>	25

INTRODUCTION TO THE PARABLES

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

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

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

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

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

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

TYPES OF PARABLES

- 1) **True Parables** – Stories based on true, visible scenes and events. For example, seeds growing, yeast at work, losing a coin... "Self-evident truths".

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

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

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

THE COMPOSITION OF THE PARABLES

- Most parables should be interpreted as teaching a single, simple lesson. Many scholars make the mistake of trying to “read too much” into the parables. This usually leads to “stretching” the teaching such that it conveys more than what Jesus intended. This type of interpretation reached its apex in the Middle Ages. But today most modern scholars agree that a master teacher such as Jesus knows that a single point, taught clearly, is better than many points forgotten.
- There are some parables, however, that teach multiple lessons by design – such as the parable of the sower, which teaches about four different ways that the Word of God is received.
- Jesus often uses the literary device of Triads – three primary characters or main illustrative keys. For example:
 - The Friend at Midnight – The traveler, the friend, the neighbor
 - The Prodigal Son – The father, the son, the brother
 - The Parable of the Virgins – The bridegroom, the wise virgins, the foolish virgins

- In Jesus parables, the end is nearly always more important than the beginning. Jesus uses “end stress” to make a clear point. This is a deliberate design on his part. It leaves the user with an impact requiring time to be absorbed and assimilated.
 - The good Samaritan is introduced last, not first
 - The man with only one talent is discussed later than the other two
- Many times parables are used to teach new lessons.

THE PURPOSE OF THE PARABLES

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

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

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

SALT & LIGHT

Matthew 5:13-16; Mark 9:50; Luke 14:34-35

Salt has both beneficial and destructive properties.

Beneficial:

- Our bodies need salt to survive.
- It is a food preservative.
- It enhances the taste of food.
- Used in many industrial processes.

Destructive:

- Corrosive, causes rust.
- Destructive – can kill in concentrated form.
- God turned Lot’s wife into salt. (Gen 19:26)

We even use the phrase, “worth your salt”. This means “not worth your wages”. The Romans served out rations of salt and other necessities to their soldiers and civil servants. These rations were called by the general name of salt (sal), and when money was substituted for these rations, the stipend went by the name of sal-arium; from this we get the term salary.

Jesus has told us that we are the salt of the earth. Without salt, we would die. Salt is a necessary seasoning that makes life on earth possible.

Have you ever thought about the reason why Jesus never said we were the pepper of the earth? If we were the pepper of the earth, we would probably think we were hot stuff...

Have you ever eaten unsalted bread, or unsalted popcorn? This generally does not happen, but if it does, there is no joy in eating such food. All the ingredients are present except one, - that flavor of salt.

But how can salt become worthless?

- This is a new concept to many of us in modern times. The salt we use today, sodium chloride, is a stable compound.
- Our modern salt, purchased from the grocery store, has an ingredient to help keep it dry and free pouring, but this was not true years ago.
- So the salt stored in bags on the dirt floors would absorb moisture, cause the bags to rot and spill the salt out onto the floor.
- Also, in ancient times salt was obtained by evaporating water from the Dead Sea. This produced chlorides of potassium and magnesium, as well as the normal sodium chlorides. Generally, the salt crystals were the first to form, and could be thus separated to reasonable levels of purity. But the salt was never pure, and in the presence of time and moisture, the residue could lose its saltiness over time.

What can you do with worthless salt? It is good for nothing. The farmers would not want it poured out on the land, as it would kill the crops. It was only good to be thrown on walking paths, to keep the weeds out and to be packed into a hard surface. Once the salt becomes "unsalty", it cannot be salvaged and made salty again. To this day in Israel, salt is spread on the flat rooftops, which hardens into a hard surface, suitable as a gathering place.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addresses the crowds together and says, "You are the salt of the earth." Just as salt stops deterioration, Christians should be a moral influence in the communities in which they live. By their words and deeds they should work against spiritual and moral corruption.

When salt is baked into a product, it dissolves and becomes invisible. It is not obvious that it is there, nor can you tell by visual examination how much salt is there. But the presence or lack of presence becomes instantly obvious when you take the first bite. Christians are not always seen, but are nonetheless potent agents, as they permeate society and constitute a restraining force in wicked and depraved world.

LIGHT

After his short discourse on salt, Jesus discusses, in parallel, light. *"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."* (Matt 5:14-16)

In Proverbs 4:19 we read, *"But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know what makes them stumble."*

In Ephesians 5:8,9 Paul says, *"For you were once darkness but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light."* These humble, poor, despised Galileans were once darkness, but then they saw a great light – Jesus. They then were made able to be light in the Lord. In 2 Cor 4:4-6 Paul writes, *"The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of glory of Christ, who is the image of God. . . . [But] God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."*

We were once darkness, but now we are light in the Lord. How are we supposed to live? As children of the light. Jesus said he was the light of the world and then he told his disciples that they are the light of the world. In other words, the world is deep darkness--this world of professors, politicians, scientists, technocrats, plutocrats, movie stars, and religious gurus. But in this world of deep darkness, God planted his church as light.

What is darkness? In scientific terms, darkness is the absence of light – much as “cold” is simply the absence of heat. We take great comfort from the example that a small light can light a whole room, and can be seen from far away on a dark night. Our small light has a much bigger effect than we might realize.

It is absurd for Christians to desire to be like the world. Christians are not to retreat from the world into monasteries, but neither are we to seek to become like the world by following its fashions and darkness. We must be in the world and function as its light as we proclaim and practice the gospel of Jesus Christ. We must realize that although the world is sinful and dark, God loves it and sent his one and only Son to redeem it.

Christians are to reflect the light of Jesus to the world. This is the light of salvation, the light of eternal life, the light of the knowledge of God, the light of the joy of salvation, the light of hope, and the light that shines in darkness. It is the light that opens the eyes of the blind and causes them to see the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Our mission is to be light to the world. When the Lord Jesus Christ commissioned the apostle Paul, he told him, *"I am sending you to [the Gentiles] to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God"* (Acts 26:17-18). And Peter tells us in

1 Peter 2:9, *"You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."*

HOW DO WE FUNCTION AS LIGHT?

- First, we expose the reality of evil. The way of the wicked is deep darkness and they are stumbling, but they do not know why. They are confused and have no understanding of reality. But in Ephesians 5:13 we read, "Everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible."
- The Bible as the light also exposes the sinfulness of this world. The Bible says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105). What people value and hold dear is exposed as evil by the light of the gospel.
- We function as light by being part of the church, which is the light of the world.

POINTS TO PONDER

"Have salt in yourselves, be at peace with each other," says Jesus (Mark 9:50). If Christians are unable to live at peace among ourselves, there is no way we can be effective the world. Instead, we will be branded as hypocrites

Many people never read the Bible; yet they carefully watch those who do. Why do people who routinely take part in sinful practices take great delight when a religious person is "caught" and also found to be enticed into the same activities?

To what extent should Christian engage in politics?

HIDDEN TREASURES AND PEARL OF GREAT PRICE (VALUE)

Hidden Treasure (Matt 13:44) | Pearl of Great Price (Matt 13:45-46)

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

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

These are short parables – only two sentences

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

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

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

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

The Parables of Jesus

LESSON TWO: THE GREAT VALUE OF THE KINGDOM

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

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

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

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

The parable of the pearl is very similar:

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

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

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

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

PARALLELS

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

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

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

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

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

POINTS TO PONDER

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

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

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

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

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

PARABLE OF THE GREAT FEAST (HUMILITY)

Luke 14:15-24

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

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

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

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

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

- When you are invited to a wedding feast, don't sit in the best place. Someone more important may have been invited.
- Then the one who invited you will come and say, "Give your place to this other guest!"
 - You will be embarrassed and will have to sit in the worst place.

- When you are invited to be a guest, go and sit in the worst place.
 - Then the one who invited you may come and say, "My friend, take a better seat!"
 - You will then be honored in front of all the other guests.

SOCIAL ETIQUETTE OF THE DAY

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

LESSONS OF THE PARABLE

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

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

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

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

- Matt 18:4 – We are to be as children
- Matt 23:11-12 – We are to humble ourselves
- John 13:4-17 – Jesus washes the feet of his disciples
- Rom 12:15 – Ask God to bless those who mistreat you
- Phil 2:3-4 – Consider others more important than yourselves

- I Peter 5:6 – Be humble in the presence of God
- Lev 19:18, Lev 19:34 – O.T. Basis for the “Golden Rule”
- Matt 7:12, Luke 6:31 – “Golden Rule”

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

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

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

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

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

POINTS TO PONDER

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

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

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

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

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

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

WIDOW AND JUDGE (PERSISTENCE)

Luke 18:1-8

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

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

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

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

THE CHARACTER OF THE JUDGE

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

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

THE CASE OF THE WIDOW

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

THE PLIGHT OF WIDOWS IN BIBLICAL TIMES

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

GOD'S CHARGE TO MAGISTRATES

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

THE JUDGE REACTS

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

JESUS APPLIES THIS PRINCIPLE FOR THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF GOD'S PEOPLE TO PRAY WITH FAITH AND PERSEVERANCE:

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

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

If God's people cry out to him day and night, why does he sometimes delay in answering? Even Jesus asks, "Will he keep putting them off?" But the answer to this rhetorical question

is of course not.” He may keep us waiting; he may exercise our patience; but by doing so he strengthens our faith, and in due time he does provide an answer.

WHEN THE SON OF MAN COMES, WILL THERE BE ANY FAITH ON EARTH?

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

THE WIDOW'S PERSISTENCE

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

POINTS TO PONDER

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

Should we pray for vengeance on our enemies?

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



The Parables of Jesus

LESSON THREE: PRAYER AND THE WORD OF GOD

SOIL (HEART)

Matt 13:1-9, 18-23; Mark 4:1-9, 13-20; Luke 8:4-8, 11-15

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Jesus' healing ministry is described in chapters 8 and 9. Jesus looked on the crowds with compassion, comparing them to sheep without a shepherd. *"Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.'"*
- In chapter 10, Jesus sends out his disciples, warning them of persecution and death.
- Matthew depicts the same theme in the next two chapters. Jesus is described by his opponents as *"...a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and 'sinners.'"*

- In chapter 12, the Pharisees are plotting to kill Jesus, and he is accused of working his miracles by the power of Beelzebul.
- It is as if Jesus had been sowing on shallow ground, and his seed was not reaping a good crop. Yet, in spite of all this opposition, the large crowds showed that much seed was falling on fertile ground. This sets the stage for the parable of the sower.

INTERPRETATION

The parable of the sower is one of the few parables where Jesus gives an explanation to his disciples. This explanation comes on the heels of Jesus being asked why he spoke to the people in parables. To this, he gives the reply, *“The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables.”* (Matt 13:11-13)

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

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

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

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

APPLICATION

Seed Falling On the Path

- Note the emphasis on the word “heart”
- Like birds eating seed on the path before it is sown, the devil snatches the word away from men’s hearts so that it does not take root there.
- We would say, “In one ear and out the other”

- Some people are hearers only – but they never let the word take root in their lives.
- They ignore the summary of God’s law, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart” (Matt 22:37)

THE SEED IN ROCKY AND SHALLOW SOIL

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

THE SEED AMONG THORNS

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

THE SEED IN GOOD SOIL

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

THE PARABLE OF PARABLES

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

POINTS TO PONDER

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

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

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

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

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

THE GREAT FEAST (NO EXCUSES)

Luke 14:7-14

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

THE STORY

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

One by one, they all began to make excuses:

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

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

INTERPRETATION

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

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

- The field would still be there for inspection the following day – and should be inspected before purchase, not afterward.
- The oxen could rest until the next day for evaluation – and again should have been tested before buying, not afterward.

- Newlyweds should make allowances for an occasional separation.
- Most of all, after making commitments to come to the wedding, allowances should have been made by the invited guests. If the invitation was to be declined, this should have happened after the initial invitation. Instead, the invited guests show a lack of respect to the master of the banquet by scheduling events that conflicted with their commitment.

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

The parable was addressed to all who listened:

- Jesus is telling the listeners that the feast is ready – now is the time to come.
- But the religious establishment of Jesus’ day was not ready to accept the coming of the kingdom; but common people accepted it eagerly (Mark 12:37).
- Jesus intimated that the kingdom would not lack citizens. If Israel rejected God’s invitation, he would extend the kingdom to social outcasts – tax collectors, prostitutes, and the Gentiles.

APPLICATION

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

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

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

THE LESSON OF THE PARABLE IS CLEAR:

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

JEWES AND GENTILES

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

POINTS TO PONDER

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

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

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

THE WEDDING FEAST (EVANGELISM)

Matthew 22:1-14

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS PARABLE?

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE SERVANTS ARE REJECTED AND KILLED

- Israel treated the prophets shamefully and rejected them (Matt 23:29-35)
- They rejected God’s call to repentance
- Now they rejected the Son of God

THE KING REACTS

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

THE WEDDING GARMENT

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

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

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

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

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

POINTS TO PONDER

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

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

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

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