

**CHRISTIAN GROWTH SERIES**

**The Parables of Jesus**

*Portraits of the  
Kingdom of Heaven*

Presenter: \_\_\_\_\_

Interpreter: \_\_\_\_\_

# **Dedication**

To the Christians of Chin State in Myanmar  
for their unwavering faith  
in the face of terror and oppression.

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# Christian Growth Bible Materials

## Website Description

*Christian-growth.com* offers sermon outlines, Bible studies, PowerPoint files, and gospel tracts to inform and encourage Christians in all walks of life and in every part of the world. These materials are offered freely to all who wish to “grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18) and bear in their lives the “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22-23). The basic website is presented in English with links to Christian literature in other languages.

## The Christian Growth Series

The following materials are currently available in the Christian Growth series of Bible studies.

**Church Leadership:** *Leading God’s People*

**Sermon on the Mount:** *The Christian Code of Ethics*

**The Providence of God:** *How God Takes Care of His People*

**Personal Evangelism:** *Becoming Fishers of Men*

**Bible Study:** *Creative Approaches to Bible Study*

**Fruit of the Spirit:** *Maturing in Christ*

**The Book of Job:** *The Believer’s Response to Suffering*

**The Book of Acts:** *Witnessing for Christ*

**Righteousness:** *The Path to God*

**Romans:** *The Gospel of God*

**The Parables of Jesus:** *Portraits of the Kingdom of Heaven*

## Preface

This series of twelve lessons presents the *Parables of Jesus* as Portraits of the Kingdom of Heaven. A conspicuous feature of the parables is the portrait of Christ's character and work which they provide us (Lockyer, 130). We see His *care* in the Parable of the Lost Sheep; His *sovereignty* in the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard; His *compassion* in the Parable of the Good Samaritan; and His *love* for one soul in the Parable of the Lost Coin. The parables reveal the relationships of Jesus and His Father with the subjects of His parables. Jesus is the Sower of seed, the Good Shepherd, the Master who distributes Talents, and the Rock upon which an enduring life is built. God is revealed as the patient, loving, forgiving Father in the Parable of the Lost Son, as the Judge in the Parable of the Fishing Net, and in several parables as the sovereign Ruler of the Kingdom of God. The parables describe saints and sinners, friends and foes, and a host of other characters and images that give us informative glimpses into the Kingdom of Heaven.

## Acknowledgements

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Damon Vincent  
Ozark, Missouri  
15 December 2024



**The Sower**  
Luke 8:5-8

## Lesson 1



# THE PARABLES OF JESUS

## INTRODUCTION

Parables are among the oldest and most common forms of teaching. The Old Testament contains many parables. A well-known example is Nathan's parable to David about the poor man with one little ewe lamb (2 Samuel 12:1-10). David's response indicated that he instantly understood Nathan's point: *"I have sinned against the Lord."*

About one-third of Jesus' recorded teaching is found in His parables. His message appealed to people at every stage of life because He spoke of everyday human experience that even audiences today can relate to. The subjects of His parables come from nature, from family relationships, from the workplace, and a host of other activities such as farming, building, and baking. The parables refer to all kinds of people – believers and non-believers, rich and poor, old and young—and are timeless in their ability to touch the lives of people far removed from first century Palestine. The parables convey messages of truth through analogy, comparison, or contrast and teach moral lessons that are easy to remember.

## THE DEFINITION OF "PARABLE"

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines a parable as "a usually short fictitious story that illustrates a moral attitude or a religious principle." In fact, a parable may be comprised of only one verse of scripture (Matthew 13:33). Parables invite people to examine their lives, attitudes, and spiritual condition. Perhaps the simplest definition of all is that a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.

The word "parable" is derived from two Greek words meaning "to place beside" or to place together for the purpose of comparison." Such comparisons reveal the similarities and contrasts in the parable's lesson that the audience is intended to understand.

Parables can usually be identified by the use of the word "like," as in Jesus' statement, *"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed,"* or *"The kingdom of heaven is like yeast"* (Matthew 13:31, 33). Because Jesus' audience was

familiar with these items, those who were genuinely interested in His teaching could understand the spiritual meaning of His message. Simply put, Jesus used known examples taken from the experience of His audience to explain spiritual matters that were unknown to them.

**PARABLES ARE NOT ALLEGORIES, FABLES, MYTHS, OR PROVERBS.**

**1. Allegories** are figurative applications or illustrations taken from real historical facts or events – as in the allegory of Abraham’s two sons (Galatians 4:22-31). On the other hand, parables speak of supposed events that never really happened.

**2. Fables and myths** are stories based on fantasy or contrary to fact situations. An Old Testament example is the fable of trees that choose a king (Judges 9:8-15).

**3. Proverbs** are defined as short statements that contain complete and valuable thoughts, or short and wise sayings containing practical truths that are learned by experience or through observation.

*“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and discipline”* (Proverbs 1:7). *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding”* (Proverbs 3:5).

**THE NATURE OF PARABLES**

The characters in parables do only those things we would expect ordinary people to do in the normal course of events. A shepherd returns a lost sheep to the fold, a vineyard owner hires workers, a wandering son comes home, or a merchant searches for pearls in the marketplace. The people involved in parables are not superhuman, nor do they perform miraculous feats. That is why the people who listened to Jesus could identify with the characters in His parables.

The natural events described in parables are also those we would expect to witness in nature. The seed sown by a farmer falls on various kinds of soil to produce different yields, or a mustard seed grows into a large tree, or a drag net brings in all kinds of fish. The ordinary nature of the people and events associated with parables allows an audience with open minds to understand the intended message.



## **THE PURPOSE OF THE PARABLES**

Parables are intended to convey a moral or religious principle in a way that is clear and persuasive.

- To provide guidance: Parables can offer suggestions for living a good life.
- To make complex ideas easier to understand: Parables use well-known concepts to explain unfamiliar social and spiritual principles.
- To challenge conventional wisdom: Parables can encourage people to consider a deeper meaning to the words being spoken.
- To engage different groups of people: Parables can be an effective way to persuade potential believers in an unsympathetic audience.
- To invite people to make a decision: Parables encourage a commitment to moral living.

Many people, including the disciples of Jesus, have asked why Jesus taught in parables instead of using other teaching methods. Jesus answers this question directly in Matthew 13:10–15, explaining that He spoke in parables to hide the secrets of the kingdom from some and reveal them to others. He knew that His parables could have practical meaning to His audience only if they were listening, interested, and willing to apply the message of the parables in their lives. This statement of Jesus alludes to the *three primary purposes of parables*.

### **1. Parables were intended to conceal.**

We should keep in mind that many people followed Jesus to gain some benefit for themselves such as bread or healing. The disciples of the Lord were blessed to learn “the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” because they had the right attitude toward Jesus and His teaching. But those whose hearts had been hardened by their own greed or wickedness or rebellion were kept from understanding the parables. Charles Spurgeon put it this way: “The same sun which melts wax hardens clay. And the same gospel which melts some persons to repentance hardens others in their sins.”

Essentially, Jesus was attempting to separate truth-seekers from curiosity-seekers. Disciples who genuinely sought the truth would ask Jesus to explain the meaning of His message. When He had finished His public teaching, the Master would reveal to His disciples privately the deeper meaning of the parable (cf. Mark 4:33-34).

## **2. Parables were intended to reveal.**

Although Jesus intentionally concealed the “mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” from the disinterested, His parables revealed heavenly truths to a select group of people whose hearts were open and receptive. Jesus had these people in mind when He said, “*Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear*” (Luke 14:35). Jesus was taking the known (earthly truths contained in the parables) and using them to explain the unknown (the greater heavenly truths). Only then would His hearers be able to make a spiritual application or gain spiritual insight from the parables of Jesus. Repeatedly, the Savior said, “the kingdom of heaven is like...” He would then proceed to draw a comparison between the known and the unknown “mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.”

## **3. Parables were intended to appeal.**

Some of Jesus’ parables appealed to the hearers’ sense of justice before they realized the parable applied to them. This was Nathan’s way of convincing David of his sin (2 Samuel 12:1-10). Jesus used this approach often, especially when He confronted His enemies. *The Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers* (Matthew 21:33-46) is an example of such an appeal. Jesus spoke of wicked vinedressers who refused to pay the owner of the vineyard what he was owed. After sending several emissaries to these corrupt vinedressers, the owner sent his son, whom the vinedressers eventually killed out of envy and hatred.

As the chief priests and Pharisees listened to this parable, they would likely have seen the guilt of the unjust and wicked vinedressers. But when the parable was concluded, the Bible says, “Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them” (Matthew 21:45). The words of Jesus affected the chief priests and Pharisees in the same way that Nathan’s words had affected David. They were forced by their own understanding of the parable to agree with the injustice of the situation and the need for righteous judgment against the guilty parties. Only then could the Pharisees realize that they were the real subject of the parable.

## **CONCLUSION**

Knowing the power and fascination of pictorial speech (Lockyer, 9), Jesus often used parables to respond to situations He encountered when dealing with people around Him, whether they were His disciples or a more remote audience. His parables informed and instructed friends and foes alike. They were a part of everyday conversations in ordinary environments, a natural expression of His interaction with people on a daily basis.

1. Jesus adjusted His teaching to His audience and taught moral lessons based on situations that naturally arose. For instance, Jesus told the *Parable of The Two Debtors* when he was a guest in a Pharisee's home (Luke 7:36-50). The Pharisees saw the woman's sins; Jesus wanted them to see her repentance.

2. Jesus used parables to answer questions. The self-assured lawyer learned who his neighbor was when Jesus told the *Parable of the Good Samaritan* (Luke 10:25-37). Jesus answered His own question about the lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7) to show the value of one soul.

3. The parables of Jesus often brought to light the unjust attitudes of His audience. Jesus used the *Parable of The Rich Fool* (Luke 12:16-21) to address a family situation involving greed.

4. Social, religious, and familial obligations were sometimes the basis for the parables of Jesus. In response to duties, servants should remain watchful (Luke 12:35-40), and sons should be obedient (Matthew 21:28-32). Jesus also taught that the duty of discipleship comes with a cost and requires a full and life-long commitment (Luke 14:28-33).

5. Perhaps for more than any other purpose, Jesus used parables to announce the coming kingdom of heaven among a new kind of people. In our day, the "*mysteries of the kingdom of heaven*" (Mt 13:11) containing "*things kept secret from the foundation of the world*" (Mt 13:35) are made known through the church by preaching of the gospel of Christ (Ephesians 3:8-11). When Jesus was on the earth, the kingdom of heaven was a new concept that involved a change in covenants, duties, and spiritual relationships. The parables helped in large measure to prepare people for the transition from the old covenant to the new. The nature of the kingdom of heaven, its king, and the king's subjects will be the focus of our remaining lectures.

Adapted from Dr. Tom Badia

## Lesson 2



## THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

### INTRODUCTION

The concept of a kingdom in reference to the rule of God over His people was introduced in the Old Testament, and the imagery continues to be used in the

New Testament age in a spiritual sense. Basically, the term “kingdom” indicates the sovereignty or royal dominion of a king over a realm or people. In scripture, the term “kingdom” usually refers to rule or reign rather than realm. No particular territory typically comes to mind when the Bible refers to the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God. References to God’s priests and holy nation (Exodus 19:5-6; I Peter 2:5-9) indicate His sovereignty made visible in His people—Israel in the Old Testament and the church in the New Testament (Cooper, 18).

### **THE KINGDOM IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

God’s people in the Old Testament used imagery drawn from their experience with the nations around them to imagine and describe the God of heaven, His people, and His kingdom. God is regarded as sitting upon a throne (Psalm 103:19a; Ezekiel 1:26-28) where He is surrounded by the heavenly host who serve Him (I Kings 22:19) and from where He watches over the whole earth (Psalm 33:13f.). In the praise offered to Him by Israel He was regarded as the King of the whole world (I Chronicles 29:11; Psalm 103:19b) and of all the kingdoms of men (2 Kings 19:15; Psalm 47:2, 7). He is the eternal King (Psalm 145:13; Daniel 4:3, 4) who is called in many places the Creator of the heaven and the earth (I.H. Marshal, 801).

Old Testament theology referred to the Israelites as a nation that had a special kingdom relationship with God. For example, in Exodus 19:5-6 we read, *“Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”*

This scripture indicates that the term “kingdom” does not refer to territory, but to rule. The people of Israel never fully understood that God wanted to rule over their hearts and not their land. Even when Israel was divided into two kingdoms and ultimately disappeared as a nation, the Jewish people continued to hope for the Messiah who would re-establish God’s kingdom on earth and give them back the status among nations they had enjoyed during the reigns of David and Solomon.

### **THE KINGDOM IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

A number of Old Testament prophecies refer to the kingdom’s being established in the future. Isaiah referred often to the future kingdom (Isaiah 2:2-4; 9:6-7; 11:1-9). Ezekiel (34:24), Jeremiah (30:9), and Zechariah (9:9-10) also spoke of the coming kingdom of God. Daniel specifically foretold

that this kingdom would be established during the reign of the Roman kings and would stand forever (Daniel 2:31-45).

It was, in fact, during the days of the Roman kings that John the Baptist said, “*Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*” (Matthew 3:2). It was also during the days of the Roman kings that Jesus came preaching that “*The kingdom of heaven is at hand*” and “*The time is fulfilled*” (Matthew 4:17; 10:7; Mark 1:15).

When Jesus declared ‘*The time is fulfilled,*’ He was saying that the time had come for all God had said and done in Israel’s history to be brought to completion. A new kingdom was at hand, and the universal reign of God was about to be manifested in a new and special way. The hopes expressed by the Old Testament prophets were about to be realized (Ferguson, 23).

It is clear that in several references the kingdom refers to the church. Therefore, in one sense the kingdom prophecies of the Old Testament were fulfilled when the church was established on the day of Pentecost. After the day of Pentecost (Acts chapter 2), the Bible speaks of the kingdom as being in existence (Revelation 1:9; Colossians 1:13; I Thessalonians 2:12).

The prophets closed with the promise of the Messiah’s coming (Malachi 3:1). The gospels close with the Messiah promising that the kingdom of God would soon arrive (Luke 24:45-49). The book of Acts (chapter 1 excepted) tells the story of a kingdom that has arrived (McQuiggan, 79).

### **The Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God?**

Matthew uses the term “kingdom of heaven” thirty times. Mark refers to the “kingdom of God” sixteen times. Luke uses the phrase “kingdom of God” thirty-two times. By looking at these parallel accounts (Matthew 19:23; Mark 10:23; Luke 18:24), it is clear that the two expressions are interchangeable. In fact, in Matthew 19:23 Matthew refers to the “kingdom of heaven,” and then in verse 24 he calls it “kingdom of God.”

Matthew prefers the expression "kingdom of heaven" to communicate the concept to his Jewish readers (Matthew 4:17). Mark and Luke refer to the "kingdom of God" to explain the mission and message of Jesus to their Greek and Roman audiences (Mark 1:15; Luke 4:43). It follows that these terms are functionally synonymous.

## **The Nature of the Kingdom**

Jesus emphasized the internal or spiritual nature of His kingdom. He said that *“The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed...because the kingdom of God is in your midst”* Luke 17:20-21). He was not denying the importance of the external rule of human governments; rather, He was teaching that God had brought into the world a new government to rule in the hearts of men and women (McQuiggan, 67).

Jesus says that no one can enter the kingdom without a child-like spirit (Matthew 18:3) and a forgiving spirit (Matthew 18:23-27), nor can people enter the kingdom unless they care for their fellow man (Matthew 25:31-46). All who wish to be kingdom citizens should desire for God to take full control of their lives (Matthew 6:33) and invite them into His kingdom on earth, which is a foreshadowing of the kingdom in heaven.

## **THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN AND THE KINGDOMS OF EARTH**

Jesus promised to establish His church on earth and described the church as the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 16:18-19). He told His disciples that the kingdom would come with power (Mark 9:1). The kingdom actually came with power on the day of Pentecost after the resurrection of Christ from the dead (Acts 1:8; 2:1-4).

The spiritual kingdom that Jesus foretold would be similar in many ways to the kingdoms of the nations that existed in the first century. Because the Roman empire was in control of the region where the remnant of God’s people, the Jews, were living, they would have understood quite clearly the concept of a kingdom. They knew that all kingdoms, whether earthly or spiritual, are composed of the same essential elements: king, subjects, laws, and domain (territory).

## **The Kingdom of Heaven Has a King**

1. In order for a kingdom to exist there must be a king.

A king possesses authority to rule over his subjects and the power to enforce his authority. For this reason, kings exercise considerable control over the lives, property, and activities of their subjects. Kings establish laws and hold their subjects accountable to those laws. Their authority demands respect and loyalty to the crown. In return, kings offer protection and subsistence to their subjects as well as an identity with the realm.

2. In the kingdom of heaven, Jesus is King.

Jesus is described as “*King of Kings, and Lord of Lords*” (1 Timothy 6:15). As King, Jesus possesses all authority (Matthew 28:18). He alone is the head of His church (Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18). At the end of time, King Jesus will hand over the kingdom to the Father (1 Corinthians 15:24).

### **The Kingdom of Heaven Has Citizens**

1. In order for a kingdom to exist there must be citizens or subjects who are under the authority of the king. Their ongoing relationship with the king determines whether or not they are in the king’s favor.
2. In the kingdom of heaven, Christians are citizens. Paul said that Christians are “*fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God*” (Ephesians 2:19). Kingdom citizens have been delivered “*from the power of darkness*” and “*translated*” into the kingdom (Colossians 1:13). Paul says that the act of baptism puts believers into the body of Christ, which is synonymous with the kingdom of heaven on earth (Colossians 2:9-15). Jesus explained to Nicodemus that we enter the kingdom through a spiritual rebirth (John 3:3,5).
3. The citizens of the kingdom are subject to the Lord Jesus (Colossians 3:17). Baptized kingdom citizens cannot live as if they were still citizens of the world (Romans 6:1-4; Colossians 2:20-21). Instead, their lives should demonstrate their allegiance to King Jesus and reflect the values and attitudes of kingdom citizens (Matthew 5:3-12).

### **The Kingdom of Heaven Has Laws**

1. In order for a kingdom to exist it must have a system of laws. Law has been defined as “a body of rules of action or conduct prescribed by a controlling authority, and having binding legal force. That which must be obeyed and followed by citizens subject to sanctions or legal consequence is a law” (Black).
2. In God's kingdom, the New Testament of Christ is the law. Jesus, the King, “*is the mediator of a new covenant*” (Hebrews 9:15), “*a better covenant, which was established upon better promises*” (Hebrews 8:6).
3. Citizens of the kingdom of heaven have a responsibility concerning kingdom law. Sin is a transgression of law (1 John 3:4), but the righteous will live by faith (Romans 1:17). Those who keep God’s law enjoy special blessings (James 1:25). John uses the imagery of “walking in the light” (1 John 1:7) that leads to fellowship in Christ and the forgiveness of sin.

## **The Kingdom of Heaven Has a Domain**

1. In order for a kingdom to exist it must have a defined domain, realm, or territory. Every earthly kingdom has borders that separate it from other kingdoms, nations, or countries. Those boundaries serve to identify those living within the borders as citizens and those outside as foreigners.
2. The kingdom of heaven is not defined by international boundaries. Although Jesus told His disciples to preach the gospel to the whole world, the kingdom of heaven on earth actually exists in the hearts of believers (Luke 17:21). When citizens of the kingdom of heaven travel, they take the kingdom with them. They invite others to join them in the kingdom of heaven on earth and journey with them as they make their way to the kingdom in heaven.

## **THE KINGDOM IN HEAVEN**

Christians on earth have a dual citizenship. Under the flags of worldly governments, we are to be citizens who live exemplary lives in our communities. But God's people are also citizens in the kingdom of heaven on earth. Citizenship in the earthly kingdom of heaven requires a spiritual rebirth (John 3:5-6) into the realm where God rules as king and administers His will on earth. Life in the kingdom of heaven is a walk, a transformation of heart and mind, a way of believing and living in preparation for eternity. If you are a baptized believer in Jesus Christ who is living according to His will, your citizenship is no longer "*of this world*" – you are a citizen of heaven who awaits the resurrection.

At the end of this earthly life, a more valuable citizenship awaits us in heaven (Philippians 3:20-21). All who do the will of the Father on earth will inherit the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 7:21). Christ now reigns in heaven (Acts 2:30-36), and He will ultimately bring all of His subjects into the heavenly kingdom (Matthew 25:1-13; 1 Corinthians 15:24) where we will enjoy our citizenship in the kingdom with God and Christ forever (2 Corinthians 5:6-12; Hebrews 12:22-23; Revelation 21:1-4; and Revelation 22:1-5).

Adapted from Waterbury Church of Christ



## Lesson 3



### THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER AND THE SOILS

(Matthew 13:3-9)

#### INTRODUCTION

During His earthly ministry, Jesus told more than 40 parables to the people who came to hear His teaching. His earliest recorded parable is the *Parable of the Sower* found in Mark 4:1-20, preserved also by Matthew (13:1-23) and Luke (8:4-15). The title of the parable was given by Jesus Himself as He sat in a boat on the Sea of Galilee and taught the people who gathered before Him on the shore (Matthew 13:18).

*“Then he told them many things in parables, saying: ‘A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.’ Whoever has ears, let them hear.”*

Like all other biblical teachings, parables are received by hearers according to their spiritual experience and maturity. They are meant for all people at all stages of their lives. They are like clothes that always fit and never wear out; they are like treasure made more precious by time. In this lesson, we will consider the four major topics in this parable—sower, seed, soil, and harvest—and ask ourselves what Jesus wants to say to us.

#### I. THE SOWER

*“Then he told them many things in parables, saying: ‘A farmer went out to sow his seed’”* (Matthew 13:3).

##### **Narration**

Jesus does not emphasize the identity of the sower. He places more stress on the seed, the soils, and the harvest. It is a farmer who sows, which is a natural and necessary part of his vocation. No sowing, no harvest. No harvest, no food. It’s that simple.

## Interpretation

Perhaps Jesus leaves it up to us to identify the sower. Do we imagine a minister standing behind a pulpit on Sunday morning? Do we see an evangelist holding up a Bible on a street corner? Perhaps we think of a missionary preaching the Word through an interpreter in a village across the sea. Could the sower be a Christian couple sharing the story of Jesus with a neighbor?

## Application

When Jesus spoke of sowing, He surely had in mind the spreading of the gospel. In the *Parable of the Sower*, we see many parallels to the Great Commission of Jesus (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16).

- Sowing is work, not leisure. It takes commitment and an investment of labor, time, and money.
- Sowing is lonely work. The field is often large and the workers few.
- Sowing is patient work. The harvest is not immediate but results from commitment, cultivation and care.

We can sow the seed in a variety of places and with a wide range of audiences—at work, at school, on vacation. Sometimes we sow the seed by simply living for Jesus and letting our lights shine. Edgar Guest said, “I’d rather see a sermon than hear one any day.”

We notice something peculiar about the sower in the parable. He seems to sow seed everywhere—on the path, on rocky ground, among thorns, in good soil. Isn’t this a waste of good seed? Couldn’t the sower be more careful? At first glance, we might think he is scattering seed randomly and carelessly, that he is not interested at all in a good harvest or the value of seed. But what if the sower is Jesus Christ who died for everyone, who considers every single person on earth to be worthy of salvation? What if Jesus is willing to take the risk that precious seed will not be received or appreciated by everyone? Should we consider those who reject the gospel to be unworthy of salvation?

In his book, *The Prodigal God*, Timothy Keller gives us the insight that God is recklessly extravagant in His love for us. He offers love and eternal life to everyone freely, even to those who are ungrateful and who waste God’s precious gifts of time, family, friends, and health. Because God is love, He loves to give, and salvation through Jesus Christ is the greatest possible gift.

## II. THE SEED

*“Go into all the world (the sower goes into the field) and preach the gospel to all creation (the seed is sown). Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved...”* (the harvest is reaped).

### **Narration**

Jesus’ words in the Great Commission (Mark 16:15-16) harmonize with the words of this parable. We may compare the Word of God to yeast that is dispersed throughout the dough. Remember, Jesus gave the Great Commission to only 11 men and said that the gospel would eventually be preached to all the world (Matthew 24:14, Mark 13:10, and Mark 16:15).

### **Interpretation**

Jesus tells us that the seed is the Word of God (Luke 8:11). Though Jesus speaks only of the good seed in this parable, we must remember that Satan is sowing bad seed. He sows (1) the seed of sin (Job 4:8), (2) the seed of discord (Proverbs 6:19), and (3) the seed of doubt (Genesis 3:1).

Jesus asks us to sow only good seed—the word of God, the teachings of Jesus and his servants.

1. The Seed of Faith – Luke 17:6 “He replied, ‘If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you.’”
2. The Seed of Righteousness – Hosea 10:12 “Sow righteousness for yourselves, reap the fruit of unfailing love, and break up your unplowed ground; for it is time to seek the Lord, until He comes and showers His righteousness on you.”
3. The Seed of Benevolence – Luke 6:38 “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”
4. The Seed of the Gospel – 1 Peter 1:22-23 “Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.”

## **Application**

Let us consider here two lessons from this parable.

1. If we sow no seed, we will reap no harvest. The sower sowed, and we must sow.
2. If we sow the wrong seed, we will reap the wrong harvest. Remember, Satan is also at work.

Scripture tells us (1) the word of God is able to save the souls of the lost (James 1:21), (2) this seed is incorruptible (I Pet. 1:22-23), and (3) this seed produces after its kind (2 Timothy 2:2).

*“For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart”* (Hebrews 4:12).

## **III. THE SOILS**

### **1. The Wayside Soil**

*“A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up”* (Matthew 13:3-4).

### **Narration**

As the farmer sowed seed, some fell onto a path beside the field that had been made hard by the trampling of many feet. Because the seed could not sink into the ground, the birds could easily find it.

### **Interpretation**

*“When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path”* (Matthew 13:19).

This soil represents hearts that have been hardened by sin. Many people hear the word, but their hearts are not softened by the message of God’s love. Because their hearts are hard, Satan can easily use his influence to make them ignore or forget the gospel message.

## **Application**

Satan is at war with God for the hearts of men and women. He wants all souls to be with him in hell. Satan has many ways to snatch the word away. (1) He persuades hearers not to believe the gospel; (2) he encourages them to delay their obedience; (3) he tells them their sins are too great for God to forgive;

(4) he makes them believe they already saved because they are good people; or (5) he convinces them to enjoy the pleasures of the world now rather than the pleasures of heaven later. In short, Satan uses all of his skills of rationalization and justification to keep people from responding to the gospel.

## **2. The Rocky Soil**

*“The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away”* (Matthew 13:20-21).

### **Narration**

Some of the seed fell onto rocky places. Unlike the seed that fell on the hard path, this seed sprouted, and plants emerged from the soil. However, the rocks in the soil interfered with root development. When the hot sun shone on the plants, they did not live long. It was not the heat that killed them; they died because they could not draw water and nourishment from the soil.

### **Interpretation**

Many people accept the gospel enthusiastically and even work hard in the kingdom for a while. They soon realize that the Christian life requires life-long dedication. Because they have not completely given up the world, Satan can lure them back into their old ways, and they lose faith. Jesus says these people fall away because (1) they are not able to resist the world’s temptation (Luke 8:13), (2) they experience some trouble that discourages them (Matthew 13:21; Mark 4:17), or persecution causes them to lose their faith (Matthew 13:21; Mark 4:17).

### **Application**

These people were not like the hearers Jesus compared to the soil on the path. The Word took root and began to grow. Notice their reaction to the Word.

- They heard the Word.
- They immediately received the Word.
- They received the Word with joy.

When their initial enthusiasm began to fade, they had second thoughts. The reality of a lifetime of Christian service without the pleasures of the world set in. Their superficial faith could not sustain long-term spiritual growth. From this lesson, we learn that the secret of spiritual endurance is depth.

*“So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in Him, rooted and built up in Him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness” (Colossians 2:6-7).*

### **3. The Thorny Soil**

*“Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants” (Matthew 13:7).*

#### **Narration**

Jesus next describes soil that is well plowed and deep enough, but thorny plants have already germinated beneath the surface. The thorns will always grow stronger and faster than the good seed. In this brief and simple statement, Jesus calls attention to an important fact: even good seed cannot flourish in thorny soil.

#### **Interpretation**

Later, Jesus briefly explains the deeper spiritual meaning of His parable:

*“The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful” (Matthew 13:22).*

This is not a hard-hearted unbeliever or a shallow, uncaring person. This hearer received the word and intended to follow the Lord, but the world’s attractions proved to be more compelling. Jesus knew this type of listener because He had experienced the same temptations from the same tempter (Matthew 4:1-11). Like the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16-22), many come to Jesus with good intentions. Soon they make compromises that divide their allegiance between God and the world. This was true of Judas, and it is true of all who do not make a total commitment to Christ. “Such a man is double-minded and unstable in all he does” (James 1:8). Jesus put the case quite clearly, “You cannot serve two masters” (Luke 16:13).

#### **Application**

Jesus gives clear warning that worry and concern can cloud our thinking enough to distract us from God’s word and our Christian duty. Notice also that the Word is choked by the “deceitfulness of wealth” (Matthew 13:22). However, wealth is not necessarily a vice, nor is poverty a virtue. Satan places many other temptations along the way to distract us from our goal. He knows enough about human hearts to tailor temptations to fit every believer.

There is no universal strategy or religious ritual that will automatically prevent the abandonment of faith. Disciples of Christ must follow Jude's advice, "...keep yourselves in God's love" (Jude 21) and also the instruction of Paul: "work out your own salvation" (Philippians 2:12). The plan of salvation comes with only one guarantee: "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown" (Revelation 2:10).

#### **4. The Good Soil**

*"Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown" (Matthew 13:8).*

#### **Narration**

The three soils previously mentioned by Jesus had yielded scant return on the sower's investment of seed and labor. Here He reports that this good soil had produced a welcome and bountiful harvest. Jesus goes on to explain why.

#### **Interpretation**

Three factors promote kingdom growth: a diligent sower, good seed (the Word of God), and an honest hearer. All hearers are not equal in faithfulness. Of the four hearts Jesus describes, the first one hears but heeds nothing; the second one is affected by external influences; the third heeds but is choked by internal influences; the fourth heeds and holds fast until the harvest.

#### **Application**

How do we know that we are "good soil"? Jesus refers to the fruit or harvest yield as proof, but He also commends the disciples who want to dig deeper and know more about the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven (Kercheville). Luke records a similar attitude toward God's Word in the book of Acts.

*"Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11).*

Three terms in this passage illustrate the "good soil" attitude. (1) They "received" the word, meaning they welcomed it; (2) they possessed a great eagerness or "readiness of mind" to learn more about the Scriptures; and (3) they examined or scrutinized what was said to determine its truthfulness (Jackson).

#### **IV. THE HARVEST**

*“But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown” (Matthew 13:23).*

##### **Narration**

Here is the ideal result of the sower’s labor: good seed falling on good soil yields enough grain to pay all expenses, feed the family, produce some profit, and provide seed for the next crop. Different parts of the field produce different yields.

The farmer must patiently wait several months to reap the harvest. He prepares the soil and scatters the seed, but the actual sprouting of the seed is not under his control. As the crop grows, he tills the soil, removes stones, and pulls weeds. Perhaps he hopes and prays for a bountiful harvest. Mostly, he waits for God to send the spring and autumn rains (James 5:7). He doesn’t need to know what happens, just that God causes the seed to grow.

*“Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase” (I Corinthians 3:5-7).*

##### **Interpretation**

Evangelism is sometimes a slow and frustrating process. Those who work toward the expansion of the kingdom need assurance when growth does not match their expectation. The Word of God is scattered, and some of it eventually grows. Even then, it takes time for Christians to mature enough to spread the Word themselves (I Peter 2:1-3; Hebrews 5:12-14).

##### **Application**

A farmer does not benefit from his crop until it has fully matured and yielded seed of its own. The church is not able to benefit from its work until those it has taught and nurtured to maturity have in turn developed the ability to spread the word of God to others.

*“And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Timothy 2:2).* Jesus can use more workers.



*“The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field”* (Matthew 9:37-38).

## **CONCLUSION**

Jesus wants us to know that the harvest depends on the sower, the seed, and the soil. The seed is the Word of God and will always bear fruit under the right conditions. But our experience tells us that a bountiful harvest may be followed by a crop failure. What goes wrong? Either the sower did not sow properly, or the soil was not properly prepared.

When we proclaim the gospel as God intended, the results will depend on the hearts of our hearers. If this parable is any indication of real life, God’s Word will not take permanent root in human hearts 75% of the time. But the farmer in the parable keeps on sowing! Perhaps God is saying to us that even though our message is rejected most of the time, we must continue to sow in order to reach those few who will embrace the gospel. In God’s eyes, every soul is eternal, priceless, and irreplaceable—worth more than the whole world (Matthew 16:26) and worth the life of His only Son (John 3:16). In our sowing of the gospel seed, may we be encouraged by the words of Paul, the most prolific sower of all:

*“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up”* (Galatians 6:9).

Adapted from Victor M. Eskew

## **Lesson 4**



### **THE KINGDOM PARABLES OF JESUS**

(Matthew 13:24-53)

## **INTRODUCTION**

“What is the kingdom of heaven like? What shall I compare it to?” (Luke 13: 18). This is one of the 305 recorded questions asked by Jesus during His earthly ministry (Zehnder). In Matthew 13 Jesus relates seven parables to help his audience understand what the kingdom of heaven is like. In verse 52, He also describes what a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like. Jesus explains that heaven is where the King is enthroned. From heaven the King rules His kingdom where His people live. Jesus reveals that the kingdom exists here and

now—not just somewhere we go after we die. He says that the kingdom of heaven is among us and within us (Luke 17:21). We exemplify the kingdom by our Christian witness and live in expectation of the Lord’s return so that we can join Him in the kingdom *in* heaven.

Jesus begins His kingdom teaching with *The Parable of the Sower* that foresees how the Messiah and the message of the kingdom will be received. Six other parables describe various aspects of the kingdom of heaven, all beginning with the words, “the kingdom of heaven is like...” Each of these parables shows a contrast between those who belong to the King and those who do not. We will consider five kingdom parables in this lesson: (1) The Wheat and the Weeds, (2) The Mustard Seed, (3) The Yeast, (4) The Costly Pearl, and (5) The Fishing Net.

Each parable has a different context: a farmer, a gardener, a cook, a merchant, and a fisherman. The intent is for the audience to identify with at least one of these persons so that the message will be relevant to them. Kingdom citizens can be recognized by the influence the word of God has on their attitudes and behavior, while the followers of Satan are distinguished by their love of the world (1 John 2:15-17). The kingdom parables in this lesson teach us several important truths: (1) both God and Satan are active in the kingdom of heaven; (2) the kingdom grows and spreads; (3) the kingdom of heaven has very great value; and (4) kingdom citizens should live in a way that will prepare them for judgment day.

### **The Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds**

In Jesus’ parables, soil, field, and earth represent human hearts where beliefs and attitudes give birth to actions. Seeds represent a message that people accept in their hearts as factual; it becomes part of their belief system, or faith. When the seed is from God, it fosters truth. When the seed is from the enemy (Satan), it produces a lie. The seed that takes root and matures in the human heart determines allegiance and eternal destination.

*Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.*

*“The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’*

*“‘An enemy did this,’ he replied.*

*“The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’*

*“‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’” (Matthew 13:24-30).*

### **Narration**

A man sows good seed in his field, but while his workers are sleeping, an enemy sows weeds among the wheat. Some seeds produce weeds that are difficult to distinguish from wheat until they are fully grown. When the servants ask why the field has weeds, the man tells them that an enemy sowed bad seed. He instructs his servants to let both the wheat and the weeds grow together until the harvest. At that time, the weeds can be distinguished and separated out and burned.

### **Interpretation**

The parable compares the kingdom of heaven to the field. The good seed represents the children of the Kingdom, and the weeds are the children of the evil one. The harvest symbolizes the judgment at the end of the age. The man who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man, and the good seed is the word of the Gospel. Satan tries to sow evil in human hearts, and Satan’s helpers are living all around God’s people.

### **Application**

Both God and Satan have disciples that co-exist in the world. Sometimes God’s truth is mixed with Satan’s false teaching. It may be difficult for us to distinguish between true and false disciples, but God is the judge who will separate truth from error at the judgment. It is up to us avoid evil companionship (1 Corinthians 15:33) and make sure that we believe only the truth of God’s word.

### **The Parable of the Mustard Seed**

*“He told them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.’” (Matthew 13:31-32).*

## **Narration**

It takes around 200,000 mustard seeds to weigh a pound (about 450 grams). Although it is one of the smallest garden seeds, the mustard seed can produce a very large plant that may grow to a height of 30 feet (more than nine meters). The mustard plant in the parable developed from a tiny seed and became so large that birds could build their nests in its branches.

## **Interpretation**

In scripture, trees sometimes represent authority, either spiritual or worldly. An example of worldly authority represented by a tree occurs in Nebuchadnezzar's dream that Daniel interpreted (Daniel 4:10-27). Usually, trees represent life, growth, fertility, and even immortality. An example is the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:22) and in heaven (Revelation 22:2).

In this mustard seed parable, the garden represents the hearts of men. The seed (the good seed) has grown into a tall bush resembling a tree. God's message of redemption takes root and grows in individuals with good hearts, adding them to the body of Christ. The birds of the air that perched in the branches could be a symbol of God's messengers who bring sweet music (the gospel) for others to hear.

## **Application**

Paul taught that the gospel message has its best effect when Christians are faithful to the task of planting the seed in the hearts of those about them and demonstrating God's love in their daily lives (1 Corinthians 3:6): "*I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow.*" The Holy Spirit working in those who hear the gospel will turn their hearts to God.

Using the well-known fact that from a small seed a large plant can grow, Jesus illustrates the spreading of the gospel throughout the world. Like the mustard seed, the gospel message planted in the hearts of believers can yield astonishing fruit, because new believers can bring others to Christ. Most people imagine that one tree can produce one other tree. God imagines that one tree can produce a forest.

## **The Parable of the Yeast**

*He told them still another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough" (Matthew 13:33).*

## **Narration**

A woman makes bread by mixing flour, water, and oil. Then she adds a small amount of yeast to make the dough rise and produce a more open and airy texture. The secondary function of yeast is to add strength to the dough.

## **Interpretation**

At least two interpretations are possible. (1) Flour comes from the good seed that represents the gospel with power to save all who believe (Romans 1:16). Oil (the Holy Spirit) and water (of life) are added to the flour to make a batch of dough. When only a small amount of yeast is mixed into the dough, it works its way throughout the batch. We learn from the parable of the Sower that a single seed can produce a large yield of grain. In a similar way, the yeast illustrates that God's simple message of salvation can spread throughout the world and produce a vast number of disciples.

(2) Satan is also active in the world and seeks to spoil the work of God. The yeast can be seen as Satan's false teaching that is mixed with truth through lies and deception. Jesus said, "*Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees*" (Matthew 16:6). We should remember that Satan is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44).

## **Application**

God and Satan are engaged in a battle for human souls. It is important to distinguish spiritual truth from spiritual error (1 John 4:6). The truth of God will lead sincere believers to Jesus, the bread of life. On the other hand, Satan's message puffs up pride in personal accomplishments like the yeast puffs up the whole batch of bread. Self-importance is reflected in pride and legalistic teaching. We observe from this parable that both God's goodness and Satan's evil have influence in this world. We must choose which of these masters we will serve (Matthew 6:24).

## **The Parable of the Costly Pearl**

*"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it"* (Matthew 13:45-46).

## **Narration**

A merchant searches in a market place for valuable merchandise. He sees various goods of inferior quality and ignores them. Then he finds a pearl that is extremely valuable and sells all his possessions to buy it.

## **Interpretation**

(1) Many other pearls were available in the marketplace, just as Satan offers us cheap and worldly merchandise to distract us from the kingdom of heaven. (2) The pearl represents Jesus, our precious friend and redeemer, and we are to offer all we possess to Him. (3) Along with the parable of the hidden treasure, this parable teaches us that the kingdom of heaven is worth more than anything on earth and is found by searching God's word.

## **Application**

Why did Jesus compare the kingdom of heaven to a pearl rather than to a jewel or gold? Perhaps it is because gold must be melted from ore and refined to become pure, and jewels must be cut and polished before they reveal their full beauty and great value. A pearl is a natural treasure that cannot be improved upon by man. It is beautiful and precious just as it is found. Any attempt to enhance the quality of a pearl would only damage its beauty and diminish its value. In a similar way, the kingdom of heaven is God's perfect and valuable gift to us that cannot be improved upon by human effort. The hundreds of Christian denominations and a divided church are proof that man's meddling in the kingdom of heaven can only lead to spiritual ruin.

## **The Parable of the Fishing Net**

*"Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"* (Matthew 13:47-50).

## **Narration**

This parable describes the art of fishing with a dragnet. A long net is let down beyond where fish are feeding, and the ends are pulled toward the shore to encircle the fish. Then the net is drawn in, dragging the catch of fish with it. The good fish are sorted out and put into containers, and the unwanted fish are thrown away.

## **Interpretation**

Followers of God and followers of Satan live together on the earth (1 John 3:10). They are symbolized by the two kinds of fish caught in the net. The good fish represent those who believe the gospel and come to Jesus as the

only source of eternal life. The people who are condemned for rejecting the gospel are described as bad fish.

### **Application**

The parable looks toward judgment day and reminds us that God is patient. He does not want anyone to perish and gives many opportunities to repent (2 Peter 3:9). That means He is also giving us opportunities to bring our neighbors to Christ. When all people appear before God on judgment day, it will be too late to repent. They will stand before God in two lines as either sheep or goats, which is another way of saying good fish or bad fish (Matthew 25:31-33).

### **CONCLUSION**

*“Have you understood all these things?” Jesus asked.*

*“Yes,” they replied.*

*He said to them, “Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.” When Jesus had finished these parables, he moved on from there” (Matthew 13:51-53).*

It is essential that Christians understand what the Bible says about the kingdom of heaven and eternal life. The Bible contains the Law that reveals our condition of death and our need for life. It contains also the gospel that tells of the life available through the finished work of Jesus, our Savior. The “old treasures” are the Law that demands our death, whereas the “new treasures” are the good news about the One who has redeemed us for God. These two treasures are thoroughly woven into the Bible’s story, in both the Old and New Testaments.

Adapted from Doug Olson

## Lesson 5



### THE PARABLE OF THE FOOLISH RICH MAN

(Luke 12:16-21)

#### **Background of the Parable**

When we read the parable about the rich farmer, also called the rich fool, we sometimes overlook the story that caused Jesus to teach this parable. At the close of chapter 11, Jesus was in a heated discussion with the Pharisees who wanted to trap Him in an argument. At the beginning of chapter 12, we see that thousands of people had gathered in the meantime to hear Jesus. Our Lord took the opportunity to teach his disciples about the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. He told them not to be concerned about the opinions of others and to remember that God had the authority to judge them. They should confess Jesus before men so that He would acknowledge them before the angels of God. In other words, Jesus wanted His audience to be concerned about spiritual matters above all else.

Imagine that you were among this crowd standing before Jesus and had the opportunity to ask the Son of God a question. What would you ask Him? You likely would not talk about the weather or ask Jesus about His favorite sport, but the statement from the audience that is recorded is just that trivial: “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” Of all the topics he could have discussed with Jesus, this man chose to talk about wealth. His father had died, but he expressed no sense of loss. His family was quarreling and falling apart, but he was unconcerned. He only wanted Jesus to intervene and arrange for him to get the money he so desired. His problem was covetousness.

Jesus had said that His mission on earth was to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). It was not His mission to settle family disputes. Jesus knew that many people followed Him for bread, but He wanted to give them the bread of life (John 6:26-27). In verse 15 Jesus says, “*Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.*” He wants to help the man rearrange his priorities. He tells a parable about a rich farmer who reaps a great harvest. The farmer could have shared his wealth with others, but he chose to store the grain in larger barns and take his ease for several years. In His parable, Jesus points out the foolishness of placing great value on wealth and possessions.



## **The Parable (12:16-21)**

*“The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops’ “Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.”” “But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ “This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:13-21).*

This is a simple story with a clear meaning. The foolish rich man was not a fool because he was wealthy and successful and decided to retire. He was selfish and ungrateful, but that did not make him a fool. He was a fool because in spite his blessings he forgot several matters of eternal importance. In his rush to preserve his harvest for future life in this world, he made no provision for his life after death. He did not know that this was his last night on earth. Jesus closes the story by saying, *“So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”*

Like the man from the audience who prompted this parable with his question, the rich farmer’s problem was covetousness. More specifically, it was greed. He doesn’t seem to want what others have; he has wealth of his own, but he wants more than he needs. People who are given great wealth should not hoard it for themselves. While it is appropriate to enjoy God’s abundant provision with thanksgiving and also to save for the future, this man is ungrateful. The parable of the rich fool is a valuable source of spiritual teaching that will guide us in our own thinking about our service to God and others. Let us consider six mistakes the rich farmer made that will help us understand the meaning of this parable.

### **1. He Forgot God.**

#### **A. He forgot to thank God for his wealth.**

In this passage, the rich man uses the words I, my, or mine thirteen times (KJV) but does not mention God even once when he considers his wealth. He doesn’t speak of sharing what he has, or giving it to the poor, or using it to bless his community. He thinks that having money is reward enough. But he dies that very night, and his wealth is of no use to him. He should have focused on his relationship with God instead.

In his haste to build bigger barns to ensure his future ease, the rich farmer forgets the source of his wealth. He does not become rich all by himself. The seed that was planted came from a previous crop according to God's plan (Genesis 1:29). It was God who sent sunshine and rain to make his crop grow (Matthew 5:45). The foolish, greedy farmer sought wealth and satisfaction in the wrong place. Money was his master, so God was not (Matthew 6:24). He should have followed the advice of Jesus: "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled*" (Matthew 5:6).

**B. He forgot to include God in his plans.**

The farmer makes many mistakes while planning his future, but two mistakes are paramount: he assumes that he has a long life before him, and he makes plans for the future that do not include God.

He forgets that making plans about how to use God's blessings without reference to God is foolish, even arrogant. When we believe that we alone are responsible for our successes in life, we become self-centered and self-righteous. "*So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God*" (verse 21).

**C. He forgot to seek God's kingdom.**

After speaking this parable to the larger audience, Jesus continues to teach His disciples the deeper meaning of His message. If they seek God's kingdom, God will give them both the physical and spiritual blessings they need (12:30-31). God is the all-knowing Father who is aware of what we need (12:30), and it is His good pleasure to provide (12:32). Discipleship is a matter of faith that God will furnish us with all we truly need in this life, even if we cannot see or understand the source of His blessings. God's task is to provide; we must believe and seek the kingdom first. (Kercheville, bigger-barns).

**2. He Forgot Others.**

**A. He forgot that others had helped him become rich.**

The workers in his fields planted the seed; they tilled the soil and brought in the harvest. Someone built the bigger barns. Actually, the rich farmer had very little to do with the success of his crop, yet he intends to enrich himself without giving anyone else any thanks or benefit.

### B. He forgot to share his blessings.

Not only does the rich farmer fail to mention God, he does not imagine how his blessings could in some way benefit other people. Obviously, he has more than enough for himself, so why not give some of his wealth to others? Because he is a fool! His solution to his problem of abundance is to build bigger barns so he can keep all of his wealth for himself. One of the objects of Christian labor is to help others who are in need (Ephesians 4:28). The rich farmer has the resources and opportunity to help many people, but he chooses to reserve all of his wealth for his own use and pleasure.

### **3. He Forgot That Worldly People Can Never Have Enough.**

John D. Rockefeller, then the richest man in the world, was asked, "How much money is enough?" His reply was, "More than I have." Most people can never get enough wealth. Let us say that a greedy man wants his neighbor's land. When he has his neighbor's land, he has new neighbors. Then he wants their land. If he should finally own all of the land in the world, he would likely want to own land on the moon or Mars. Some people can never be satisfied with material possessions. They can never say, "I finally have enough."

### **4. He Forgot That Material Possessions Don't Last.**

*"Life does not consist of an abundance of possessions"* (verse 15). Jesus is trying to teach His disciples and us that we live in a world that is not permanent. In our day, the glaciers are melting, the forests are disappearing, and the oceans and air are polluted. The planet we live on is doomed to destruction (2 Peter 3:10-12). In spite of this, we continue to construct "permanent" buildings to live in and "permanent" warehouses to store our "permanent" treasures. For most people, "permanent" means "as long as I live."

Nothing material is permanent. The possessions we treasure so much are perishable (Matthew 6:19-21). Thieves might steal them, or they might rust or corrode. Stock markets crash, and crops fail. Computers, cars, and machines wear out or become obsolete. All the things we own will one day become old and useless. Before that, they will likely go out of style. Jesus is asking us why we would want to invest in things that don't last. A cyclone could have destroyed all of the rich fool's barns in less than a minute.

### **5. He Forgot the Source of True Joy.**

The wealthy fool was excited and happy at the prospect of greater wealth, but he was only fooling himself by thinking that his bigger barns would provide a

secure retirement. Had he lived, he would have found out that increasing wealth does not increase one's peace of mind or joy. The world is full of miserable millionaires who prove this point. Believers understand that the source of true joy is:

- Faith and trust in God.
- Personal righteousness and purity.
- Generosity.
- Hope for eternal life.

These things money can serve but cannot buy, and the rich fool forgot this. He thought that having a lot of possessions made him rich. Had he lived, he would more likely have experienced more stress, more concern, and more involvement with the world, because the more of the world he owned, the more the world would have owned him.

Life is not just about owning and enjoying material possessions. Life is about knowing, loving, and serving God. Life is also about loving other people and experiencing that love from others. The rich fool forgot that the purpose of his wealth was not to insulate himself from other people. His wealth was intended to enable him to help others who were less fortunate.

Jesus gave everything for us. Let us be content with what we have and enjoy God's grace that is sufficient for every need. This attitude is the source of true joy and true wealth.

## **6. He Forgot about Death.**

The farmer spent all of his time, thoughts, efforts, and energy planning for his future life on earth, although tomorrow is promised to no one. Most people have attended the funerals of friends who have died at the age of 15, 20, or 30 years, yet they assume that they themselves will live 100 years. This thinking is not only unrealistic, it is foolish.

God says to the man in the story, "And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" (verse 20). His wealth would be left behind to others who did not earn it and would not appreciate it. While preparing for his retirement, he made no preparations for what would happen to him or his wealth after his death.

*"But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation*

*and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (1 Timothy 6:6-10).*

We should always live our lives so as not to forget that one day we will die. And more importantly, we should keep in mind that we will be judged. We sometimes worry about how God will judge us. Did I lie, or cheat, or steal? We seldom consider that God will judge us according to the gifts and abilities He has given us. What about our health that allows us to serve Him? Are we using our education for God’s glory? Do we exercise our political freedom to promote the kingdom of heaven? God has given us riches that are worth far more than gold and silver. What are we doing with these blessings?

### **Conclusion**

Wealth does not necessarily put us in spiritual danger. Many wealthy people have served God unselfishly. However, it is dangerous to be a rich fool.

- Let us serve God with all that we have received from His store of blessings.
- Let us use our gifts and talents to serve the less fortunate.
- Let us remember that peace and joy are spiritual blessings that we should receive with gratitude and share with others.

Adapted from Mike Mazzalongo

## **Lesson 6**



### **THE PARABLE OF THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR**

(Luke 18:9-14)

#### **INTRODUCTION**

A major theme of the book of Luke is the kingdom of God. The kingdom is the good news (4:43). It welcomes the poor (6:20); it requires childlike faith (18:17); and it demands dedication and perseverance (9:62). Luke describes the character of citizens in God’s kingdom, and tells us about Jesus upon whom the kingdom is built (cf. Matthew 16:18; 1 Corinthians 3:11).

Luke shows us that Jesus had a heart for sinners. After all, they are the ones He came to save. The despised, neglected, and outcast of Jewish society were often the objects of Jesus' admiration, pity or love. He visited the houses of Levi and Zacchaeus, both tax collectors (5:27-32; 19:1-10). He was amazed at the faith of a centurion (7:1-10) and a widow (21:1-4). He praised his anointing by a sinful and penitent woman (7:36-50) and called a Samaritan a good neighbor (10:25-37).

## **I. THE TWO EXTREMES**

Much of the Lord's teaching was directed to people at opposite ends of the Jewish moral and religious spectrum. He reserved some of his highest praise for the people who exemplified the character of kingdom citizens, but his disdain and anger were directed toward the mighty, the proud, the arrogant, and the self-righteous in Jewish society (Matthew 23:1-36). They were the people who felt that they deserved the praise and respect of the poor and common people they despised. Jesus made it clear that wealth and high social status did not guarantee a place at God's right hand, whereas humble servants would always be welcome in God's heart. In the parable that we will now consider, Jesus addressed a person in each of these categories.

*"To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get. But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, God, have mercy on me, a sinner. 'I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted'" (Luke 18:9-14).*

## **II. THE TWO MEN**

The contrast between these two men is striking. In the eyes of the Jewish people, a Pharisee was the model of virtue and wisdom and personified the morally upright people who were favored by God. On the other hand, a tax collector was a synonym for sinner (Luke 5:30). This profession represented all that was vile and immoral in Jewish society. A few more details will illustrate this distinction.

### **The Pharisee (Luke 18:9)**

This parable is similar in several ways to the *Parable of the Lost Son* in Luke 15. Both parables are addressed to self-righteous Pharisees who considered themselves to be the elite of Jewish religious society. Notice how Luke introduces the parables recorded in chapter 15.

*“Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”*

Many teachers and preachers tell people what they want to hear, but Jesus approached people with the message they needed to hear. He could be stern or loving and could forgive or condemn, according to the spiritual condition of the people He taught. In this case, He was dealing with Pharisees, who were known for their pride and self-righteousness. The people Jesus speaks to here had two faults that needed to be addressed, not only for the good of the Pharisees, but as an object lesson for others.

First, they had absolute confidence in their righteousness. Like the young man who asked Jesus how to obtain eternal life (Mark 10:17-27), they had a long list of their spiritual accomplishments and felt that they had earned a place in heaven due to their exemplary holiness. The same attitude has existed in all ages because nearly everyone has an inflated estimation of self-worth.

The second concern that Jesus addressed was the judgmental attitude of the Pharisees. They condemned all other segments of their society as socially or religiously inferior. Their self-righteousness caused them to despise and dismiss others as irredeemable, such as harlots, tax collectors, Samaritans, and Gentiles.

In contrast, they saw themselves as the indisputable gold standard of righteousness. “Do you want to know what a righteous servant of God looks like? Just look at me!” The apostle Paul dismisses this attitude by saying that God “*saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy*” (Titus 3:5). The Old Testament had already warned about this kind of hypocrisy: “*Keep away; don’t come near me, for I am too sacred for you!*” (Isaiah 65:5). Such people believe that their perfection cannot be improved upon, so why should others not admire and imitate them?

### **The Tax Collector (Luke 18:13)**

What made the tax collector different? Why would Jesus endorse a seemingly immoral person as one who is more worthy of the kingdom of heaven than the Pharisee? Chiefly, it is the humility of the tax collector that impresses Jesus. The man will not even enter the temple. Instead, he stands some distance away because he recognizes his unworthiness to approach God. He will not lift up his eyes to heaven where God resides, but shamefully looks down at the ground. Furthermore, he beats his chest, a sign of extreme sorrow and contrition. He admits that he is an unworthy sinner who is not fit to be in God's presence. Scripture often teaches us that God honors the humble (James 4:8-10) and wants a broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51:17). By his position, posture, and attitude, the tax collector demonstrates his extreme humility.

### **III. THE TWO PRAYERS (Luke 18:11-13)**

Let us remember that Jesus, in whose name we pray, is telling this story. He wants us to examine ourselves, particularly when we pray. Prayer is the most intimate relationship we have with God, a time that calls for complete honesty and a realistic assessment of our spiritual triumphs and failures. It is especially important for us to be aware that God does not need to be informed about our current level of holiness. He already knows all about us, which is far more than we know about ourselves.

#### **The Pharisee's Prayer**

Jesus presents the Pharisee as a man obsessed with his sense of self-righteousness and filled with arrogant pride. When he prays, he stands apart from the other worshipers, perhaps to be recognized by them and to distinguish himself from them. His prayer, directed to himself rather than to God, is actually a list of his accomplishments that are intended to impress God and his fellow Pharisees.

He looks at the tax collector now and then as he informs God of his own superior character. Speaking with an exalted tone, he lists all of his merits. He fasts and tithes and abhors any criminal act such as adultery and theft. He is superior to the despised tax collector in every conceivable way. The Pharisee's prayer reflects his sense of self-appreciation, whereas his character reveals his true self.

- (1) He is *egotistical*, thinking that he is incapable of sin, and thus does not need forgiveness.
- (2) He is *arrogant* in calling attention to himself as a righteous person.



- (3) He is *selfish* in that he mentions others only to declare them inferior to himself.
- (4) He is *ungracious* since he is not really giving, but only returning some of what he has received.
- (5) He is *overconfident* because he trusts too much in his own acts of merit.

### **The Tax Collector's Prayer**

What a refreshing contrast we see in the prayer of the tax collector. The man's prayer consists of a mere seven words, but Christ praises him. He is an example of a person who is "*poor in spirit*" (Matthew 5:3). Instead of boasting about his good qualities, he labels himself as "*a sinner*" (18:13; Romans 3:23). He confesses his need for God and pleads for God's mercy (18:13). After telling the story, Jesus says that this tax collector is justified, whereas the Pharisee is not (18:14).

In his prayer, the tax collector brings to God no list of admirable virtues, and no record of conspicuous holiness. He does not adorn his spiritual failures with weak excuses. He doesn't say to God, "I know I haven't kept all of your commandments, but I love my wife and children. I've been a good neighbor and work hard for a living. I want to be a godlier person, but my job puts me in bad company. You know I want to come to the temple more often, but the Pharisees despise me." He doesn't even say, "God, you know as well as I do that my heart is more sincere than that arrogant Pharisee over there, so please give me a break!" Instead, he brings the confession of a failed servant standing in need of grace.

### **IV. THE TWO RESULTS (Luke 18:14)**

The effect of these two prayers is instructive. The Pharisee fails to impress God. In spite of his religious credentials, external holiness, and pious rhetoric, he does not go away justified. Although he prides himself in his understanding of scripture, he has neglected one of scripture's clearest pronouncements: "*I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings*" (Hosea 6:4–6). If God's Old Testament servants did not show mercy, God did not accept their sacrifice. If New Testament Christians are not merciful, God will not hear their prayers.

Our righteous acts do not bring about our justification, especially if we neglect important obligations such as justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matthew 23:23). The Pharisee had relied on his own works to save him. In reality, there is not one person who is completely righteous because all are under the power

of sin (Romans 3:9-10; 3:23; Psalm 14:1). We know our good works cannot justify us, and we know that if we do not show mercy, God will not hear our prayers (Proverbs 15:29).

The tax collector has perhaps a long way to go before he can stand completely in God's favor. He will need to find new employment and new friends, but he has made a good beginning. His humility impressed God more than the superficial righteousness of the Pharisee. We can imagine that he will go to the temple more often and finally have the courage to lift his eyes to heaven, the source of forgiveness and blessing.

### **CONCLUSION**

When the Pharisee came to God, his hands were full. He carried a measuring stick with which to compare himself to others. He carried a résumé with a long list of his achievements. The tax collector came with empty hands and a broken heart. Unlike the Pharisee, the tax collector understood the need for his repentance and God's mercy.

The tax collector's prayer causes us to examine our own standing before God. What do our prayer life, our church activities, and our giving reveal? The tax collector knew that God would find little in his life or prayer to justify him. He knew what God would see when he searched his heart, so he made no excuses. Like the tax collector, when God looks at what we have done, we must quickly utter the words, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

Adapted from Brent Kercheville

### **Lesson 7**

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## **THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN**

(Luke 10:25-37)

### **INTRODUCTION**

This parable is introduced by a dialogue between Jesus and an "expert in the law," also known as a lawyer or scribe. While making copies of scripture, lawyers became very familiar with the Old Testament and were considered to be authorities in the interpretation and application of the law. They were

respected as men of wisdom and had great influence in matters concerning the regulation of Jewish civil and religious life.

### **The Conversation between Jesus and the Lawyer**

*“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”* The lawyer might have been testing Jesus but basically, he wanted to establish that he was righteous and that his knowledge, wisdom, and law-keeping were sufficient to make him acceptable to God. In this way, his attitude was similar to that of the rich young man who also asked Jesus how he could have eternal life (Mark 10:17-27). The questions of both men indicated that they already felt justified.

We learn by asking questions, but we often learn more when someone else asks us to answer a question. The Bible record shows that during His earthly ministry Jesus asked 305 questions that were designed to help His listeners find the truth of God (Zehnder). *“What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?”* (Matthew 16:26). *“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I say?”* (Luke 6:46). These were soul-searching questions designed to help the inquirer discover genuine truth.

Jesus was often confronted by opponents who set traps for Him with questions. Through twisted logic, they tried to force Him to agree with their position. *“At the resurrection, whose wife will she be?”* (Matthew 22:28). *“Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?”* (Matthew 22:17). The lawyer’s inquiry that prompted Jesus to tell this parable was such a question. Jesus helped the lawyer find the answer by asking, *“What is written in the Law? How do you read it?”* In other words, *“What does this Law mean to you?”*

The lawyer knew the scriptures regarding the greatest commandments, so he immediately replied, *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind,”* and *“Love your neighbor as yourself.”*

Jesus confirmed the lawyer’s knowledge of scripture: *“You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live.”* Jesus promised eternal life to the lawyer if he would keep this commandment sincerely, but the lawyer immediately revealed that he had his own view of God’s laws: *“He wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’”*

## **A Matter of Interpretation**

Why would the lawyer ask Jesus such a question? It was because of the nature of the Old Testament law. The only way Jews could keep the law was to redefine God's commandments. God said, "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind,*" and "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*" The Jews found that they could not love that much, so they interpreted the law to mean, "Love God to the best of your ability." With the law so defined, they could meet their own standards and did not have to repent or confess their sins or ask forgiveness. They became self-righteous. That is why the scribe asked, "Who is my neighbor?" He wanted to limit his obligations. He wanted to restrict the number of people he was required to love, and he wanted to establish his own standard for loving his neighbor.

## **Misunderstood Righteousness**

Can our efforts to be righteous ever make us holy in God's sight? Of course not. The holiest among us are still sinners (Romans 3:23). As the apostle Paul teaches, "[We] know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ" (Galatians 2:16). One of the reasons for the Old Testament law was to prove that human beings cannot be judged righteous by God through keeping the commandments. It was simply impossible to keep all of them perfectly. It was God's plan from the beginning to replace the Old Testament law with the law of Christ (Galatians 3:24) so that believers could be justified through faith in Jesus (Romans 5:1). The people God created were not good enough to save themselves, but Jesus could.

The lawyer's view of God's commandments replaced love with legalism in order to satisfy his ego. He was practicing a *religion of works*, which demands a quota of good deeds. He believed that righteousness consisted of (1) his goodness, (2) doing right instead of wrong, and (3) leading a sinless life. His knowledge of the Old Testament should have revealed to him that even the holiest of Old Testament characters such as Noah, Moses, and Abraham were far from sinless. Holiness through law-keeping was simply unattainable.

*Heart religion*, on the other hand, is based on the righteousness of Christ and is motivated by love and the desire to serve and bless others as much as possible. To point out the flaw in the lawyer's thinking, Jesus tells this parable to explain who a neighbor is and what a neighbor should do.

## I. THE PARABLE

<sup>25</sup>On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>26</sup>“What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?” <sup>27</sup>He answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’<sup>1</sup>; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” <sup>28</sup>“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.” <sup>29</sup>But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” <sup>30</sup>In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. <sup>31</sup>A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup>So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup>But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. <sup>34</sup>He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. <sup>35</sup>The next day he took out two denarii<sup>[e]</sup> and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’ <sup>36</sup>“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” <sup>37</sup>The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

### The Parable Summarized

A man travels from Jerusalem to Jericho, a distance of about 20 miles or 30 kilometers. When he comes to a dangerous section of the road, he is beaten and robbed, stripped of his clothing, and left half dead. A priest and a Levite pass by. We are not told why they do not help the victim, only that they continue on their way. Then a Samaritan stops and shows compassion. He bandages the man’s wounds, applying oil and wine, and takes him to an inn. He pays the innkeeper to provide care and promises to repay any additional expenses when he later returns.

### Jesus Makes a Point.

Jesus poses the question: “Which of the three proved to be a neighbor?” The lawyer replies with the obvious answer: “He who showed mercy on him.” Jesus then advises the lawyer to do likewise.

Notice that Jesus changes the focus of the original question, “Who is my neighbor?” He wants the lawyer to ask himself, “Who was the one who

behaved like a neighbor to the one in need?" Jesus wants to show the lawyer what it means to "love your neighbor as yourself."

## **II. LESSONS FROM THE PARABLE**

### **A neighbor is someone who needs our help**

Among the Jews, it was a common belief that neighbors were people who lived near to them or shared the same race, nationality, religion, or political views. As a Jew, the lawyer would have regarded the Samaritan as a person of a different race, nationality, and religion. In addition, the Jews considered the Samaritans to be enemies. It is likely that most Jews would have refused to help the injured man. Casting the hated Samaritan as the hero of the parable must have hurt the Jews deeply.

Notice that we are told nothing about the injured man: not his nationality, or his occupation, or whether he was rich or poor. To be a good neighbor, we don't need any of that information. We only have to know that someone is in need. Cosmo Lang, Archbishop of Canterbury, once said, "Be in your spirit neighborly, and then every man will be your neighbor." The only appeal of the injured man was his need. And of course, that's how Christ responds to us. We were broken, ruined by sin, unable to help ourselves. It was when we were most helpless, most unworthy, and most unlovely that Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

### **It is easy to make excuses not to help.**

The Samaritan was the third person to arrive at the crime scene. Why didn't the priest and Levite offer some help? Why did they pass by on the other side of the road? Several possible reasons come to mind.

- (1) This was an area known to be dangerous, so the man was asking for trouble when he went that way. Did he deserve what happened to him? If so, did he deserve help? We don't help people because they deserve help; we help them because they need help. We use the opportunity to share God's love.
- (2) The priest and the Levite might have been afraid that the men who robbed this fellow were still hiding in the vicinity, ready to attack the next person who happened along. Should we refuse to help someone because we are afraid their problems might affect us? Again, love is the key to making the decision.
- (3) Perhaps they convinced themselves that the victim was dead already. There was no reason to stop to help if there was nothing they could do. This was the easiest excuse.

(4) Maybe they had urgent business to attend to. Priests and Levites were important men. They had responsibilities. Helping the injured man would have affected their afternoon appointments.

(5) They might have expected that someone else would come along and take care of the problem. Maybe they thought, “I’ll pray for him as I walk by, and ask God to send someone else to help.”

(6) They were probably not trained in medical procedures. How would they deal with broken bones or internal injuries? They might have made his condition worse. Did they send a doctor to help the man?

More excuses were possible. It might have been expensive to care for the man. Perhaps they weren’t strong enough to lift the man. But couldn’t they at least give him a drink of water? Couldn’t they have stayed with him until help arrived? Couldn’t they have shown some mercy in some way? That was the point Jesus wanted to make when He told this parable. Anyone can show mercy in some way in any situation.

That’s what Jesus meant when he rebuked the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 23:1-36). They were doing all the right things; they were scrupulously following all the rules, but for the wrong reasons. They weren’t acting out of love; they were acting out of self-righteousness according to rules they had in some cases contrived.

### **How then should we react to people in need?**

We should react like the Samaritan. What did he do? He took pity on the man, whereas the others thought only of themselves. He cared about the man’s condition. He took action, not in order to cover his own guilt or to satisfy himself that he had done what was expected. He met the needs of the injured man. He bandaged his wounds. He arranged lodging and further care. He wasn’t thinking about meeting his obligations. Those kinds of concerns are fundamentally about self. They’re about whether actions conform to a code of conduct. Instead, the Samaritan’s concern was focused on the injured man—on his wounds and other needs. In showing love to that man, he more than fulfilled his obligations as a neighbor.

### **CONCLUSION**

This parable can be summarized by considering the various viewpoints of the characters in the story.

(1) The lawyer asked the wrong question because he looked at the parable from the wrong viewpoint. He saw the wounded traveler through the eyes of

the priest and the Levite, who had seen a foreigner who was unlike them. They saw an injured man who needed help that they were unwilling to give. It is one of the ironies of human nature that people sometimes deny to others that which they would desire for themselves.

(2) The Samaritan saw a man in need. Perhaps he asked himself how he would want others to react if he were the injured man. This is the essence of the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12).

(3) The injured man saw the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan through the eyes of a dying man. He likely wondered why God's servants would leave him to die unaided and alone. He was surely grateful to be saved by a man whom he otherwise might have despised.

(4) Jesus saw all of the characters in the parable as sinners whom He was willing to die for. He asks us to decide which one behaved like a neighbor and follow his example.

The lawyer revealed the limitation of his religious conviction when he asked "Who is my neighbor?" In reality, he was asking, "What are my obligations in regard to my neighbor, and how far do those obligations extend?" The question echoed Peter's inquiry about the frequency of forgiveness (Matthew 18:21).

Jesus answered the lawyer as if he had asked two questions: "Who is my neighbor?" and "How can I be a good neighbor?" The corresponding answers are, "Everyone in need is your neighbor" and "Be kind, helpful, and merciful to your neighbor." These answers address opportunity rather than obligation and change the focus from the giver of help to the receiver. Such neighbors let their lights shine to glorify God, not themselves (Matthew 5:16).

Adapted from Alan Perkins



## Lesson 8

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### THE PARABLE OF THE WISE AND FOOLISH BUILDERS

(Matthew 7:24-29)

#### INTRODUCTION

As Jesus brought His *Sermon on the Mount* to a close, He wanted to make sure that the people had understood the meaning of His longest and most profound sermon. He had taught them many lessons about how they should conduct themselves in the kingdom of heaven. That is the real point of His final lesson. We cannot just say that we are kingdom citizens or Christians or attend church or read the Bible and then fail to do what the Word of God says.

These last remarks of Jesus make a distinction between those who put His teaching into practice and those who do not. In Luke's account of this parable (Luke 6:47-49), Jesus begins by asking the question, "*Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord' and do not do what I say?*" True commitment to the truth is required if we are to endure the trials we encounter in our service to God. To illustrate this commitment, Jesus tells one of His best-known parables.

*"Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."*

As with all parables, this one has two levels of meaning. Jesus was a carpenter, but He wasn't teaching carpentry. His parable is not about building houses; it has to do with building lives. The parable illustrates the importance of building one's life on the strong foundation of Jesus Christ. A weak foundation may not be revealed when everything is going well, but it can lead to a crisis when faith and commitment are put to the test.

#### I. THE FOUNDATION

The tallest building in the world since 2009 is the Burj Khalifa (Khalifa Tower) in Dubai. Its 160 stories reach 2722 feet (830 meters) into the sky. How is it possible that a tower so tall can stand so securely? The stability of

this record-breaking building is due to its enormous foundation that contains 58,900 cubic yards (45,000 cubic meters) of concrete, weighing more than 110,000 tons. To provide further support beneath the foundation, 192 piles extend more than 160 feet (49 meters) into the earth. The Burj Khalifa is safe because its foundation is solid, but not all famous structures are so sturdily built.

The Leaning Tower of Pisa in Italy is one of the most well-known structures in the world because of its extraordinary tilt of four degrees. Construction began on the historic bell tower in 1173 and lasted for nearly two centuries. The tower began to lean after only two floors were built. By 1990, the top to the tower was nearly seventeen feet (5.2 meters) further south than the bottom. What caused the problem? The builders constructed the tower that was 183 feet tall (56 meters) weighing 14,500 tons on sandy soil, digging the foundation only 10 feet (3 meters) deep. The unstable soil could not evenly support the structure, resulting in its famous tilt.

These extreme examples illustrate the need to have a firm foundation for any permanent structure. In this parable, Jesus contrasts the house of a wise man with the house of a foolish man. The difference is not to be found in the visible structures, but in the foundations beneath them. In previous sections of His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught that external works of righteousness, which are visible like a house's roof and walls, cannot make anyone right with God. Justification before God is based on internal righteousness and integrity of the heart, which are invisible like the house's foundation.

### **Foundation of the Church**

Old Testament prophecies had foretold that the church was to be grounded upon the precious stone that had been tested and rejected by the Jews (Isaiah 28:16; Psalm 118:22). When Jesus asked His disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” (Matthew 16:15), Peter replied that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Jesus said that He would build His church on that foundation. The “rock” upon which the church was to be built was the *truth acknowledged by Peter*, namely that Jesus is the Christ, God’s Son (Jackson). Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, “*For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ*” (1 Corinthians 3:11). Paul later told the Ephesian brethren that the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone” (Ephesians 2:20).

## **Foundation of the Christian Life**

How can Christians be sure that their lives are built on the right spiritual foundation? We have seen that the church is built upon Christ; He is its foundation. If the church is built on Christ and we are in the church, we have Jesus as the foundation of our spiritual life. A life without Jesus as foundation and Lord cannot eternally endure.

Faith in Jesus and His resurrection give us “*confidence in what we hope for and the assurance about what we do not see*” (Hebrews 11:1; 1 Timothy 6:17-19). Like the unseen foundation of a well-built house, our faith provides indispensable support for all our Christian service. Brotherly love and fellowship bond us to our foundation in Christ Jesus.

## **II. THE STRUCTURE**

All buildings are constructed for a purpose. Foundations are important, but the structure built upon the foundation is the practical part of any building. This is also true of God’s spiritual building, the church. Paul says that members of the church of Christ are “God’s building,” (1 Corinthians 3:9), while Peter writes that members “*as living stones are being built up as a spiritual house*” (1 Peter 2:5). To the church at Ephesus, Paul described how members are to grow and mature:

*<sup>19</sup>Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, <sup>20</sup>built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. <sup>21</sup>In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup>And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit* (Ephesians 2:19-22).

When we accept Jesus as the foundation of our spiritual life, we must begin to build the structure. We add substance to our lives by growing in Christ. Paul said, “Christ Himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11-13).

The spiritual gifts we receive from God (1 Corinthians 12) enable us to grow into mature Christian servants. The abilities we lack are supplied by other brethren who have been blessed with gifts we did not receive. When we combine our gifts with those of other Christians, the entire body of Christ is built up. The individual members of the body work together to make a living church that is a blessing to the members and also to the world around them.

### **III. THE BUILDERS**

The wise and foolish builders had different priorities. The wise builder focused on more than just the dwelling. He saw the importance of security, stability, and longevity. That is why he built on the rock. Furthermore, he didn't cut corners to save time or money in the present. He also demonstrated compassion and concern for other people who might one day live in his house.

The foolish builder showed none of these concerns. Even though he would live in the house, he didn't seem to think the foundation mattered. He evidently wanted to build the house quickly with the least expenditure of labor, time, and money. He had no long-term vision and did not foresee the dangers coming his way. In the end, it cost him dearly.

The story is told of an architect who took a business trip and told his foreman to construct a large and costly house for a rich client in his absence. The foreman decided to use inferior materials in order to save one-half of the building cost and secretly kept the rest of the money. The house looked good, but it was of weak construction and could not last for many years. When the architect returned, he praised the foreman for his excellent building skill. Then he reached into his pocket and handed the foreman the key to the house. "This is your reward for being an honest and dependable foreman," he said. The foreman had cheated himself.

### **IV. THE STORM**

The proof of a structure's strength is its endurance. The wise builder was aware of a proven fact of life—storms are bound to come. When those emergencies happen, they can spell disaster if they are not anticipated. That is why the wise builder invested in quality materials and built on a firm foundation. In the long run, his investment proved to be wise.

The foolish builder spent less money on his house, in part because he neglected the foundation. His cost-cutting measures turned out to be a false economy when he lost his entire investment. An old proverb says, "The

bitterness of poor quality lingers long after the sweetness of cheap price.” This was certainly true of the foolish builder.

All of us will face storms as we build our lives. We may experience a troubling medical diagnosis, an economic setback, the loss of a family member, or a severed relationship. Regardless of the nature of the storms, we must be prepared to face them. Our faith in Jesus and the support of our Christian friends will help us bear life’s adversities.

## **CONCLUSION**

In His parable, Jesus contrasts the house of a wise man with the house of a foolish man. Jesus has been teaching about external works of righteousness, which are visible to all like a house's roof and walls. He also spoke of internal righteousness and integrity of the heart, which are invisible like the house's foundation. Nearly every feature of the wise man’s house is identical to the features of the foolish man’s house. Their structure is the same, the rains that fall on them are the same, the floods that rise against them are the same, and the winds that blow against them are the same. There are only two important differences—their foundations and their endurance.

Jesus uses these facts to show that the only eternally decisive difference between wise and foolish people is their reaction to the words of Jesus. In the parable, both the wise man and the foolish man hear His words, but only the wise man takes them to heart and lives them with integrity. He builds his entire life on the rock of true discipleship and genuine subjection to Jesus Christ (Lockyear, 157). In contrast, the foolish man hears Jesus’ words but does not put them into practice (7:26). He is like the forgetful hearer who is not changed by the gospel (James 1:22-24). Only those who hear and obey the words of Jesus will be blessed in what they do.

Life presents us with many challenges, trials, and uncertainties. The *Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders* challenges believers to heed the teachings of Jesus, establish their lives on the solid rock of His Word, and stand firm amid life’s ever-changing circumstances.

Adapted from Kyle Rye

## Lesson 9



### THE IMPORTANCE OF CHOICES

#### INTRODUCTION

“Attitude is a choice. Happiness is a choice. Optimism is a choice. Kindness is a choice. Giving is a choice. Respect is a choice. Whatever choice you make, makes you. Choose wisely” (Bennet). The decisions we make, from casual choices to crucial resolutions, have an impact on our lives that may not be immediately evident. It can be said that our life is the sum total of our choices that shape our character, affect our relationships, and determine our destiny. No one can decide to be born into this world, but once we have the ability to make decisions, we do so to our own benefit or peril. Free will can be a blessing or a curse, depending on the life choices we make. If we choose to align ourselves with God’s will, we can experience a fulfilling life, whereas our obstinate insistence on having our own way almost always leads to negative, even disastrous consequences.

Every choice made in the present affects the future, but it is impossible to anticipate the result of a particular choice because of the vast number of possible consequences that arise as each choice influences one or more of our other choices. Life is a journey, and on our journey, we come to numerous forks in the road, each requiring the choice of direction. Our present station in life has been determined by the roads we have taken. It is impossible to say where we would now be or what character we would now possess if we had taken just one different road.

Choices become more complicated and tend to get out of our control if we include others in the decision-making process, such as friends, family members, or a life partner. Career choices introduce us to co-workers and colleagues that usually influence our lives. But beyond all of these choices that can have a decided impact on our daily lives and careers, our choices in the spiritual realm determine not only our path and happiness in this life, but also where we will spend eternity.

#### Some Old Testament Choices

##### (1) Choose life

Because spiritual choices matter greatly, the Bible speaks of them often. Near the end of his life Moses challenged his people this way: *“This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life*

and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live” (Deuteronomy 30:19).

### (2) Choose God

As Joshua was an old man and nearing death, he reminded the people of Israel about what God had done for them. Then he exhorted them with these words: “*But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD*” (Joshua 24:15).

### (3) Choose the right way

Psalm 1:6 shows us the result of the ultimate choice: whether or not to follow the path to God. “*For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish*” (Psalm 1:6).

### **Choices in the Sermon on the Mount**

In His *Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus asks His followers to choose between following worldly desires and pursuing a life dedicated to God. We must choose to prioritize God above material wealth and earthly concerns, exemplified by the choice between masters (Matthew 6:24): “You cannot serve God and money.” The location of our treasure indicates our eternal goal—heaven or hell.

Jesus teaches that our ultimate choice between God and the world is preceded by our choice to embrace characteristics like poverty in spirit, mourning, meekness, a hunger for righteousness, mercy, purity of heart, and peacemaking, rather than seeking worldly comfort or power. Jesus’ sermon emphasizes the importance of inner intentions and motivations behind actions. This means that we should not only avoid outward acts of wrongdoing but also guard against internal desires that could lead to sin. Jesus illustrates this attitude with a variety of parables that challenge us to make a choice between Jesus and the world.

(1) Jesus tells us that we can be the salt of the earth only if our salt has not lost its flavor (Matthew 5:13).

(2) Our light can reflect God’s love and glorify Him only if we let it shine for others to see instead of concealing it (Matthew 5:14-16).

(3) We are to be on guard against false prophets who try to distract us from our heavenly goal and service to God. They are wolves in sheep's clothing, but we can recognize them by their worldly fruits (Matthew 7:15-20).

(4) We will not be disappointed on Judgment Day if we follow Jesus in spirit and in truth according to His will and sincerely confess His name to those about us (Matthew 7:21-23).

Many of the choices we make in regard to Christian discipleship are summarized in the parable Jesus tells about the *Narrow and Wide Gates*. Let us notice some points in this parable that will help us on our journey to join Jesus in heaven.

## **THE TWO PATHS (Matthew 7:13-14)**

### **Introduction**

Our lives can be pictured as a journey from birth to death. Every human being is on this journey, but there are different conceptions of the journey and its purpose. God's Word teaches us that we are on a spiritual journey, whether we are religious or not. During our journey, we make choices that affect our direction and destination.

Jesus tells us that there are two paths or ways that we may travel as we take our journey through life. Each path has its own beginning, and each has its own end. One path is crowded with many people while the other is traveled by only a few. It is important to understand why this is so. We should ask ourselves, "Will my journey lead to the right destination?" This will come to pass only if we are on the right path. Let us notice what Jesus said about the two paths.

*"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it"* (Matthew 7:13-14).

## **I. TWO GATES**

### **The Wide Gate**

The first of the two gates described by Jesus is the entrance to the way that leads to destruction. It is said to be wide because it offers easy access to its path. No particular qualification restricts entrance through this gate, and no sacrifice or special effort is required for admittance. The gate is wide enough to permit a great assortment of baggage that may be carried on the journey. This is the gate of materialism, worldliness, and greed. Through this gate enter



the people who have an unforgiving spirit and harbor thoughts of prejudice, envy, and hatred. Because this gate is so wide and so easily accessible, most people eventually pass through it. They take their journey onward along the path of least resistance in a large company of travelers who have the same attitudes and the same destination.

### **The Narrow Gate**

The second gate symbolizes the starting point of the path that leads to life. We notice that it is a small gate, thus distinctly different from the wide gate first mentioned by Christ. Because it is narrow, the gate permits no encumbrances that would hinder the traveler's spiritual journey. Selfishness and worldliness must be left behind—no unholy attitudes or sense of self-righteousness may be carried through this gate. The two gates Jesus describes are the two possible starting points of life's journey. Behind the gates lie two very different paths leading to two vastly different destinations.

## **II. TWO WAYS**

### **The Broad Way**

The way that leads to destruction is broad because it is crowded with most of the world's population and allows travelers to behave as they wish and enjoy the lifestyle they prefer. This is the way for open-minded people who are tolerant of others in their company.

### **The Narrow Way**

The narrow way behind the small gate is more restrictive than the broad way. Travel on the narrow way is more difficult because many worldly comforts and attitudes have been left behind. This is no place to hike or stroll. It is a path that requires constant attention to navigate. The Devil, like a roaring lion, may appear at any time, and temptations are placed along the way to distract Christian pilgrims from their goal.

## **III. TWO GROUPS**

### **The Many**

The wide gate opens the way to a wide path that allows a large group of travelers to take their journey together. The people on this path can travel without changing their lifestyles, and they can dress, speak, and behave as they wish. In the beginning it is a jolly company, but at the end of the journey, many regrets arise.

## **The Few**

Few travelers find the path behind the narrow gate because most people are not looking for it. Many who begin the journey on the narrow way decide to travel on the broad way instead. Earth's history proves that most people choose the path that does not lead to God. Consider that all but eight people perished in the flood of Noah's day and that most of the people who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses failed to reach Canaan. Observe on any Sunday morning how many people are in worship services and how many are not. These statistics are instructive.

## **IV. TWO DESTINATIONS**

### **Destruction**

The path that leads to destruction is broad. This path is taken by people who do not know God and who have not obeyed the gospel. In their lives, they have cared little for spiritual matters. They have passed through the wide gate and have set out upon the broad way. Now they are approaching their destination which John describes as "a lake of fire" (Revelation 20:15). Most people reach this destination because the way was easy, and they did not heed the Bible's warnings. Besides, Satan makes the way look attractive until the very end.

### **Life**

Now Jesus reveals that only a few have arrived at the destination of eternal life. These are the believers who were set free from sin (Romans 6:3-7) to become slaves to righteousness (Romans 6:17-18). At the end of their journey, they will hear Jesus say, "*Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world*" (Matthew 25:34). This is the most desirable goal in life, but the love of the world keeps most people from taking the path that leads to this destination.

## **CONCLUSION**

In John 14:1-6 Jesus tells His disciples that He is going away, but that He will return and take them to heaven with Him. He assures them that He is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" and that no one can come to God except through Him. Previously, Jesus had described himself as the "good Shepherd" who is the "gate to the sheepfold" (John 10:9-11). Walking the narrow road is a choice to embrace Jesus as Shepherd and Savior and declare that "*Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path*" (Psalm 119:105). Jesus will lead and comfort us on our journey, even as it leads through the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4). Let us follow Jesus along the narrow way that leads to eternal life.

## Lesson 10

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### THE PARABLE OF THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS

(Luke 16:19-31)

#### INTRODUCTION

In this section of Luke's gospel account, Jesus teaches about the honest use of money in God's service. He has spoken about the cost of discipleship (14:25-33), which includes putting Jesus ahead of family and even one's own life. Discipleship also includes the wise use of resources, including money. He has told the *Parable of the Shrewd Manager* (16:1-13) and has warned about making money a master or a god (16:13).

In His audience we find again the Pharisees, the constant adversaries of Jesus. On this occasion, they ridiculed and rejected His message—not because it was false, but because they loved money. Jesus warns them that God knows their hearts, and it is useless to try to justify themselves in the eyes of others (16:15). Trench (162) has noted that the covetousness of the Pharisees was a consequence of their unbelief in God and in God's Word. It follows, therefore, that their heart was set on this world. Refusing to believe in that invisible world known only to faith, they experienced too late the reality they had refused to see while living.

To demonstrate the truth of what He has been saying, Jesus told another parable about a rich man, a theme He often used. His aim was to describe the terrible end of people who live only for self-gratification and who neglect to use their "good things" (16:25) for the benefit of others.

#### The Story

Jesus tells about a rich man who lives a luxurious life, while a poor beggar named Lazarus suffers outside his gate, begging for scraps. When they both die, the (formerly) rich man awakes to find himself condemned in a place of torment. He can see Lazarus far away in the blessed company of Abraham. The man begs Abraham to send Lazarus to him to relieve his suffering. Abraham reminds the man that the circumstances he and Lazarus had known while living have been reversed after death, that he is now suffering while Lazarus is comforted. Besides, Lazarus could not approach him because a great and un-crossable chasm is situated between them. Thinking of his family, the man asks that Lazarus be sent to warn them, so that they would not

share his fate of suffering in torment. Abraham replies that his family can only avoid torment if they listen to Moses and the prophets.

### **Parable, Historical Account, or Fable?**

*The Rich Man and Lazarus* is included in these lectures about the parables of Jesus, although it has some unique features not found in other parables. (1) Luke does not call the story a parable. (2) Only in this story told by Jesus are any of the characters named. (3) Parables are defined as “earthly stories with a heavenly meaning.” The story of the rich man and Lazarus presents spiritual truth directly, with no earthly metaphor. (4) The setting for most of the story is the afterlife, as opposed to the parables, which unfold in earthly contexts. In that sense, it is “a heavenly story with an earthly meaning.”

On the other hand, this story begins exactly like the parable previous to it and to which it is connected: “*There was a rich man*” (16: 1, 19). For this and other reasons, this story is sometimes assigned to a unique class of narratives that combine several features. “The story seems to be its own message, one that uniquely comes from beyond the grave. We conclude that it is both history and a special sort of parable (cf. R.L. Whiteside, *Bible Studies*, Vol. 4, p. 424)” (Earnhart. 149).

In any case, this narrative is not a fable, because like all parables, it describes events that really could have happened. Beyond that, it teaches us important realities about life beyond the grave, facts available only from this short, remarkably compact story. Jesus presents his narrative in three parts that describe the disparity in the lives and destinies of two very different individuals and the commonality they shared in death.

### **I. DIFFERENT LIVES**

To reach the hearts and minds of various portions of His audience, Jesus describes the two extremes of economic status: one man is rich and one is poor. The rich man abounds in wealth that provides all of life’s luxuries at his bidding. He dresses in the most costly and fashionable clothes, and at his table he is served an abundance of exquisite and delicious food. We have the impression that he would be the envy of kings and that every worldly pleasure is his for the asking. Surely, he is aware of the beggar lying helplessly near his door, but there is no mention of his slightest regard for the unfortunate man. His routine of excess and luxury is uninterrupted by the consideration of his fellow man’s need.

We see in the rich man an example of abundance poorly used, in that he wastes his wealth on himself to the neglect of his fellow men, some of whom have nothing. The rich man does not make friends with God so that he would be received into eternal dwellings. He uses his wealth as if it were his own by right and gives none of it to God or man.

In contrast, Jesus presents to His audience the picture of Lazarus, suffering the embarrassment of abject poverty and relying on the mercy of others to provide his meager daily bread. Perhaps too weak to move himself, he is laid at the rich man's gate where he can receive a portion of the scraps that fall from the table or are thrown out now and then by the servants. His condition is deplorable, his body wasted by starvation and disease. His only relief from pain is provided by the dogs that lick his sores.

## **II. COMMONALITY OF DEATH**

Though the differences in the earthly lives of the rich man and Lazarus are many, they share one common and equalizing event: they both die. For Lazarus, death is the welcome release from want and misery. The rich man, who surely wants to enjoy his luxurious existence many more years, finds that his wealth cannot extend his life by even one hour. There is no mention of Lazarus' body ever being buried, but the angels of heaven accompany his soul to Paradise. The rich man is likely given an elaborate and costly funeral, but in spite of his wealth, or perhaps because of it, he awakes to find himself in torment.

## **III. DIFFERENT DESTINIES**

Immediately after their deaths, the circumstances of the two men are dramatically reversed. Both find themselves in Hades, the "realm of the dead," where the spirits of the departed reside temporarily after death. Lazarus is comforted in Paradise, whereas the rich man is distressed by great suffering (Luke 16:23, 25). Part of the rich man's torment may have resulted from his realization that Lazarus is receiving in paradise the mercy he could have provided while he and Lazarus were living.

Based on the description given by Jesus, Hades has two zones. There is a place of torment where the souls of the wicked reside, and the "bosom of Abraham," also known as "paradise," occupied by the righteous dead. All of the dead remain in Hades until the resurrection of the dead at judgment day, some to be blessed and some to be condemned (John 5:28-29).

A comparison of Hades and Judgment Day (Hamilton) indicates that the day of death fixes the soul's eternal destiny, even before God pronounces His sentence on Judgment Day. Jesus tells the rich man that the chasm between him and Lazarus is fixed and cannot be crossed. We learn from Jesus, therefore, that our fate is sealed at death. No provision in the afterlife allows for a change of spiritual status. All of the dead will appear before God and Jesus at judgment in two groups: either as the righteous, represented as sheep, or as the unrighteous, represented as goats (Matthew 25:32-33). Jesus says that the unrighteous will “*go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life*” (Matthew 25:46).

## **CONCLUSION**

Of the two main characters in this story, perhaps the more easily remembered is Lazarus, the piteous and helpless beggar covered with sores. But Jesus focuses His attention on the rich man and condemns his heartless attitude toward Lazarus. The rich man's life of excess and luxury ends in eternal misery because he has no love for his suffering fellow man. Beyond this obvious and important lesson, several others are worthy of consideration.

1. Man cannot serve two masters. If he gains the world and loses his soul, his loss will be eternal (Mark 8:36). Although the Pharisees presented themselves as examples of holiness, they were at heart self-righteous and inconsiderate of the poor among the Jews.
2. The path to torment begins with the choice to serve self, whereas a life dedicated to the needs of others will be rewarded with God's blessings in the afterlife (Matthew 25:34-36).
3. In the future, personality continues—feeling, knowing, seeing, reasoning, and remembering. These faculties will aid our bliss, or intensify our torment. The regrets of earthly life can result in deep sorrow, but the remembrance of regrettable events after death must cause unimaginable sorrow because no restitution to the injured or neglected is possible.
4. Heaven and hell are realities, and our eternal destiny depends, not upon wealth or poverty, but upon our relationship to Jesus Christ. God has delayed the destruction of the world so that we may have time to prepare for the return of His Son (2 Peter 3:9).

5. The day of death is essentially an individual's judgment day because the eternal destiny of the soul is determined by one's spiritual condition at death. There is no provision for a change in spiritual status after earthly life has ended. The teachings regarding purgatory and all other "second chance" theologies are false doctrines that can only diminish the will to love and serve God until death with heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30).

6. This parable has been used to teach that rich people go to hell and poor people go to heaven. While it is true that riches can distract from spiritual obligations (Luke 18:25), Abraham was in Paradise, not in the place of torment, and he was very wealthy during his earthly life. We should notice also that poverty, in and of itself, is not a virtue, nor is wealth, in and of itself, a crime. Some people are poor because they are lazy, while many rich people are benevolent and kind. The determining factor in the spiritual status of the rich man and Lazarus was not wealth, or lack of it. The difference in their destinies had to do with their attitudes. The rich man's callous indifference to Lazarus' suffering condemned him, not his wealth. Lazarus was one of God's creatures who was unable to work to feed himself and was thus to be seen as an object of pity, which the rich man was not capable of.

Adapted from Keith Sharp

## Lesson 11



### THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

(Matthew 25:14-30)

#### INTRODUCTION

This parable was told by Jesus near the close of His ministry in the context of the "end times," a term associated with judgment day and the destruction of the world. At the end of time, Jesus will return to gather His servants and take them to heaven at the same time He hands over the kingdom to God (1 Corinthians 15:24). Jesus has been telling His disciples about the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the world (Matthew 24:1-51). He says that no one knows when that time will come except God (Matthew 24:36) and that the

disciples should “*be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him*” (Matthew 24:44). The unannounced appearance of Christ is a theme often recorded by Matthew (24:36-39, 42-44, 48-51; 25:5-6, 13).

The parable we now consider follows related parables dealing with the fig tree (Matthew 24:32-36) and the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13) and shares many features with them. In this trio of end-time parables we are warned to be prepared for the unannounced return of the Lord. The parables regarding the ten virgins and the talents particularly deal with differences in conduct and levels of preparation for the Lord’s return. As Jesus tells these parables one after the other, there seems to be an escalation of urgency in His message. He calls attention to ever higher responsibilities and more serious issues.

In comparison to the imagery of the ten virgins, more than waiting is involved in the *Parable of the Talents*. Here we have a specific trust. The duty is not mere watching, but diligent working; and the rewards and punishments are proportionately greater. We pass from the joys of the kingdom and the possibility of missing them, to the serious duties of the kingdom and the great honors and heavy penalties that follow obedience and negligence (Pulpit Commentary, p. 495).

## **I. THE STORY**

### **The master goes on a journey**

The master of a large estate goes on a journey and leaves his three servants in charge of his goods, in this case a large amount of money. He entrusts the servants with different amounts, measured in talents, presumably according to their abilities and trustworthiness. A talent was a measure of weight, usually for silver or gold. The biblical talent weighed about 29 kilograms or 63 pounds and represented the equivalent of several years’ wages. One servant receives five talents, another two talents, and the third servant receives one talent.

### **The master’s expectations**

We should notice that the master gives no particular instructions regarding the disposition of his goods. The subsequent actions of the servants indicate that he expects them to not only guard his money but invest it and gain a profit for him. The context of the parable tells us that the owner had different expectations from the three servants in that he entrusted them with different amounts of money.



### **The master returns**

The master comes back unannounced and settles accounts with the servants who are required to give evidence of their stewardship. The master's initial assessment of the servants' abilities and trustworthiness seems to be justified when they report their handling of his money. The servant who had received five talents returns twice as much money to the master as he had received. The servant who had received two talents has likewise doubled the master's money. The third servant returned the same amount of money he received, without profit or loss, having buried it in the ground.

### **The master's reaction**

After each servant gives a report of his stewardship, rewards and punishments are distributed accordingly. The master is pleased with the stewardship of the servants who had received five talents and two talents. As a reward, they are given responsible positions and allowed to share in their master's happiness. When the servant who had received one talent returns the money just as he had received it, he tries to justify his actions. He attempts to shift the blame for his poor stewardship to the master whom he accuses without apparent justification of being unjust and ruthless. In so doing, the man with one talent demonstrates his own laziness and lack of responsibility.

The master's reaction is immediate and predictable. The unprofitable servant is punished, not for fraud or theft, but for neglect of duty. He had judged the master to be harsh and unfair. Whether this was true or not, he should have taken all measures to ensure that he made at least a little gain on the money entrusted to him to avoid the disappointment and anger of his master.

## **II. APPLICATIONS**

### **What are we doing while we wait for the Lord to return?**

This parable teaches us that we all need to be faithful in our service to God while we await His Son's return. Christ is represented by the Master, and the slaves represent all of us. The parable is designed to help each Christian determine which of the servants represents him or her, and that depends on what we are doing in the Master's service at this time.

### **Whatever we have comes from God.**

"Every good and perfect gift is from above..." (James 1:17). All of God's creatures receive some of His gifts, such as sunshine and rain, unconditionally (Matthew 5:45). But He reserves His spiritual gifts for His children and expects us to use them to glorify Him (Matthew 5:16). It is an unwise and

unjust servant who uses God's gifts for his own glory and fails to honor God with them.

**God grants His gifts to us according to our ability to use them.**

Paul often used the phrase, "the grace given" to teach that he could speak or work for God because God had been gracious to him. *"For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you..."* (Romans 12:3); *"According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation..."* (1 Corinthians 3:10). Paul also used this phrase in reference to all obedient Christians: *"But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift"* (Ephesians 4:7); *"Having [spiritual] gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them..."* (Romans 12:6).

God knows us completely and assigns His gifts to us according to our individual ability to use them. Most Christians would count life, love, and salvation as gifts, but is not the ability to resist temptation a gift (1 Corinthians 10:13)? Each gift we receive is a portion of God's grace that He imparts to us as a blessing to be used in His service and keep us on the path to heaven. The talents in this parable represent not only the natural skills and abilities we possess, but also the spiritual gifts we receive from God to be used in the church to glorify Him (Romans 12:4-8).

**Everything should be done with a view toward God's judgment.**

The day of reckoning will come. *"Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming"* (2 Peter 3:11). In this and other parables, Jesus stresses the need to be prepared for His return. Above all, we need to be prepared for judgment.

Our judgment will be based on our personal successes and failures, not those of others. *"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive compensation for his deeds done through the body, in accordance with what he has done, whether good or bad"* (2 Corinthians 5:10). The two-talent man was not chastised because he did not earn five talents. Rather, he was rewarded because he dealt wisely with two talents that were placed in his trust. In other words, he was judged based on what he was given and what he did with it.

The one-talent man did not fail because he had only one talent. He failed because he was dishonest and irresponsible. His irresponsible nature made him

an untrustworthy servant; hence the one talent instead of two or five. Moreover, he was dishonest in his attempt to excuse himself by ascribing his own faults of character to his master. Although he likely imagined he could have gained twenty talents had he been given five, he did not gain even one talent from the money with which he had been entrusted. He could have taken the little he received and returned it with at least a small gain, but he found it to be much easier to do nothing and blame others for his poor stewardship. We should be aware that God will not only judge us for doing wrong, but also for not doing right: *“If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn’t do it, it is sin for them”* (James 4:17). Because he failed in his duty, the one-talent servant was judged to be worthless and cast out of the kingdom.

### **Good stewards are rewarded for their service.**

The servant who was given five talents had more ability (and thus more responsibility) and returned more profit. But the master was equally pleased with the two-talent man because he also did the best he could with what he received. The Lord requires more from those to whom He gives more, but even those who are not given as much can please God and receive His blessings if they use His gifts wisely.

### **Conclusion**

This parable speaks to all of us. It teaches that God has entrusted us with opportunities and abilities and asks what we are doing with them. Jesus touches on considerations beyond the obvious teaching that there is a reward for us if we act responsibly. Also to be considered is the moral value of our responsibilities. When God entrusts us with a duty, we are morally obliged to fulfill that duty. Our responsibility for the use of God’s gifts can be summarized in a simple equation: **Ability + Opportunity = Responsibility**. God enables us to serve Him in ways that are individually unique. He gives us opportunities to use our abilities in His service. He expects us to responsibly use the abilities, or talents, that He has given us.

Among the many spiritual lessons in the *Parable of the Talents*, we notice these in summary. (1) We learn that there is the great diversity of the talents with which God entrusts us. (2). We see the common responsibility of all before God, be their talents few or many. (3) We notice the certainty found in the very nature of a trust, that a day of reckoning must come. (4) We find that the true appreciation of life is gained by treating it as a stewardship. And (5) we discover that the apparent insignificance of a talent can never excuse its neglect.

The parable directs our attention especially to the point that God works out a gracious purpose in moral character by putting people under responsibilities. Jesus teaches us that the master not only wanted his property cared for during his absence; beyond and above that, he wanted to test his servants and incite them to a faithfulness which he could recognize and reward when he returned (Pulpit Commentary, p. 510).

Adapted from Dave Schmidt and Brenden Ashby

## Lesson 12



### THE PARABLE OF THE LOST POSSESSIONS

(Luke 15:1-24)

#### INTRODUCTION

In Luke chapter 14, Jesus closes one of His parables with the words, “*Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear.*” Chapter 15 begins with the observation that “*the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’*” The audience divides itself spontaneously into two parts: those who want to hear what Jesus had to say, and those who do not. In response to the interest of the tax collectors and sinners, but especially to rebuke the arrogance of the Pharisees and Scribes, Jesus tells this parable. Although most usually treated as three separate parables, Jesus delivers a single unbroken narrative having three pictures in which each illustration flows into the others. When we read, “*Then Jesus told them this parable*” (Luke 15:3), we understand that the entire chapter is comprised of a single parable that has been called *The Parable of Lost Possessions* (Lockyer, 281). In His address, Jesus speaks of His love and compassion for lost sinners. In so doing, He includes a description of every type of person in His audience, and by extension describes all people everywhere who are lost and in need of salvation. We may more easily comprehend the message of Jesus if we study each section of the parable separately, in the order told by Jesus.

#### I. THE LOST POSSESSIONS

##### **The Lost Sheep (Luke 15:3-7)**

Louis Rushmore (Gospel Gazette, p. 2) has written, “God’s love of man is frequently expressed under the figure of sheep (Matthew 9:36; 10:6; John 10;

Hebrews 13:20; 1 Peter 2:25). God's people are compared to sheep that have gone astray (Psalm 119:176; Isaiah 53:6; Jeremiah 23:1-2; 31:10; Zechariah 13:7). Employing the figure of shepherds and sheep, God chastened the leaders of Israel centuries before for their dereliction of duty toward the people. God promised to select a shepherd through whom the defunct shepherds would be punished and the scattered sheep would be recovered (Ezekiel 34). Jesus came to do what leaders in Israel should have done all along—'seek and save that which was lost' (Luke 19:10)."

Jesus referred to Himself as the Good Shepherd (John 10:11, 14-15) who lays down his life for the sheep. Peter referred to Jesus as the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4). Otherwise, the figure of a shepherd is often cited in both testaments to describe the relationship of God and Jesus, first with physical Israel, and later with spiritual Israel (Psalm 77:20; 80:1; Isaiah 40:11; Ezekiel 34:14-16; 37:24). *"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters"* (Psalm 23:1-2). Further, the illustration of a shepherd and sheep is used to convey the responsibility of elders to the church (Acts 20:28-29; 1 Peter 5:2-3).

Happily, we learn from the parable of the *Lost Sheep* that despite the wandering in sin which characterizes our mortal existence, God cares for us and will seek us earnestly. God's attitude toward the lost is seen in the diligent search of the shepherd. It is one thing to accept sinners; it is another to go out and look for them.

### **The Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10)**

When we lose a possession, how do we react? That depends on how much we value what was lost. If it is of little value to us, we may not even notice it is missing. Even if we do realize it is lost, our search may not be very intense. On the other hand, if we lose something of great value to us, we search with great diligence until it is found.

In the second part of His parable, Jesus tells of a woman who lost something of value to her: a silver coin. Although she still has nine coins, she places great value on all ten of them. In this situation, her attention and efforts are directed toward the one coin that was lost. The urgency of her concern is clearly stated in verse 8: *"Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?"*

As in the story of the lost sheep, the coin in this story represents a lost soul. How much value do we place on the souls of others? Our souls are the most valuable possessions we have, and they were given to us by our God, who made us in His image (Gen. 1:27). The conclusion we must draw is that we should place as much value on a lost soul as Jesus does: *“Christ came into the world to save sinners”* (1 Timothy 1:15).

Note that the sheep in the previous part of the parable is lost in the wilderness, whereas the woman’s coin is lost at home. Perhaps she is responsible for its loss, or maybe someone else is. In any case, the coin is lost, is precious, and is sought after until it is found.

Do we have family members living in our homes who are lost? Are any members of our congregation absent from the assembly? What about our neighbors? They are all precious to Jesus. They are precious to the angels, and they ought to be precious to us. Are we seeking them?

Adapted from Daniel Curtis

### **The Lost Son (Luke 15:11-32)**

#### His rebellion (15:11-12)

In this “pearl of parables,” Jesus tells a story about a father who has two sons. The younger son demands his inheritance from his father. In ancient times, the father would assign various portions of his estate to be given to his children upon his death. But the younger son wants his portion now, an act of greed and an insult to his father. He is saying to him, “I do not love you. I just want your property!” This son completely rejects his father’s love. The father gives his insolent younger son what he asks for, and he leaves home.

#### His life in the far country (15:13-16)

To remove himself completely from his father’s authority, the younger son takes his belongings and goes to a distant country. There, he squanders his wealth in wild and reckless living. Then the prosperous times turn to hopeless times. A severe famine arises, and he becomes so desperate that he has to feed pigs to stay alive. He is unclean and defiled. This son has gone from momentary wealth to complete poverty. He has wasted his fortune and has no resources to sustain him, not even friends.

### His repentance (15:17-20a)

Jesus says that the young man's circumstances bring him to his senses (15:17). His rebellion against his father has ruined his life. He realizes that the hired servants in his father's house are better off than he is. He wants to go home but realizes he can no longer claim the status of a son (15:19). He makes no excuses for himself. He resolves to return to his father and say, "*Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants*" (15:18-19). With many doubts and fears about his reception, he starts the journey back to his father.

### His father's response (15:20b-24)

Now Jesus draws our attention to the father. Clearly, the father has been waiting and hoping for his son's return. We are told that the father sees his lost son while he is still a long way off. All sorrow and despair disappear. He is not angry that his son has left home, wasted his inheritance, and embarrassed him. He feels only compassion. He runs to his son, throws his arms around him, and kisses him.

The younger son attempts to give his speech that he has prepared. He tells his father that he has sinned against heaven and him and is not worthy to be called his son. The son makes his confession. But notice the response of the father. The father does not treat his lost son like a hired servant. No, he receives him as his son. "Kill the expensive fat calf; give my son the best robe; put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet; We are going to celebrate. *'For this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found'*" (15:24)

Adapted from Brent Kercheville

## **II. APPLICATIONS OF THE PARABLE**

### **Something valuable is lost**

The similarities in these three parts of the parable are pointed and purposeful. The shepherd, the woman, and the father, respectively, lose a possession that is valuable.

- To the Shepherd, the lost sheep represents a loss of future income as well as the loss of time and effort previously spent on that particular animal.
- To the woman, the lost coin represents a loss of income and future security.
- To the father, the loss of a son represents the loss of someone deeply loved and cherished, but also the loss of part of his legacy and his

security in old age. In Jewish society, a man's wealth and worth were often measured according to the number of sons he had.

### **Something valuable is found**

In each of these stories, the person who suffered loss searched diligently for that which was lost.

- The Shepherd leaves the ninety-nine sheep that are securely at home and ventures into the wilderness to find his lost sheep. The effort and risk are great, but his safely recovered sheep is reward enough for his trouble.
- The woman leaves no stone unturned as she searches her house for the lost coin. Her joy is great when she finds the missing silver piece.
- The Father desires his son's genuine love and risks losing him forever by allowing him to go into the far country. When the son returns, as the father hoped, he invites his family and servants to rejoice with him.

### **Seeking the lost**

Concern over something lost and joy over its recovery is the prominent feature of each part of the parable. The sheep, the coin, and the son are all lost and all worth saving. It is serious to lose a sheep, worse to lose money, and worst of all to lose a son. Hillyer Straton (1959) says that we might name the three stories of this chapter "*The Parables of the Four Verbs—Lose, Seek, Find, Rejoice.*" These words represent the range of human emotion from despair to joyful gratitude. They are also reflected in the appeal of the gospel message of Christ, who suffered for the lost and rose in exalted glory to redeem them from the grip of sin, prompting the angels of heaven to rejoice.

### **The gospel within the gospel**

Of the many applications of this trilogy of lost possessions, few could be more appropriate and meaningful than their representation of the three types of lost sinners. In fact, every person who is lost and in danger of eternal separation from God is to be found in one of the pictures of the lost that Jesus paints.

The sheep is lost and likely knows it is lost. Because of curiosity it strays and eventually becomes separated from the other sheep and the shepherd. Such a sheep represents the foolish, unthinking kind of disciple who wanders away from God—a step or two outside the flock at first, and then longer excursions until momentary freedom becomes permanent separation. Then comes the



forlorn sense of fear and helplessness. Happily, the sheep is sought and found by the loving shepherd and brought back to the fold.

The coin is lost, but being without life, has no consciousness or sensation of being lost. Its lost condition prompts neither discomfort or anxiety. The coin is lost, not because of inferior composition or defect of mintage. It is lost because it is badly handled or unconsciously dropped. We have here symbolized those lost sinners who are largely ignorant of themselves and passive in the hands of those with whom they associate. Such are easily handled by stronger personalities. The coin remains stationary until found where it has been dropped, and returned to its proper place.

The son is lost, deliberately, willfully, and consciously, and the loss of a human being is the greatest tragedy of all. The prodigal is guilty of an inexcusable waywardness. His departure from his father and home is self-determined and daring. But the father and prodigal move toward each other and find each other again. This story of the lost son touches every tender heart and can be comprehended under three simple headings: 1. Sick of Home. 2. Homesick. 3. Home Again.

Statistically, the loss of these three possessions is not catastrophic.

- The lost sheep represents a 1% loss—one out of a hundred.
- The lost coin means a 10% loss—one out of ten.
- The lost son is a 50% loss—one out of two.

But the shepherd seeks his lost sheep, as if it is the only sheep he possesses. The woman feels the loss of her coin as if she has no other silver piece. The father is heart-broken over the loss of his younger son. It is not enough to tell him that he still has another son with no desire at all to leave home. His father's heart goes out to the missing one in spite of his willfulness and wickedness.

Adapted from Herbert Lockyer (281-282)

### **III. THE OLDER BROTHER**

We must keep in mind that Jesus has addressed His parable primarily to the Scribes and Pharisees in His audience. He describes three lost possessions to illustrate that God gives second chances to those who are lost. Jesus describes people who carelessly wander away from God and those who are neglected or influenced by others to go astray. Their situations are addressed and resolved through diligent searching and restoration. In the case of the lost son, who

intentionally turns his back on the father, restoration is accomplished through the son's repentance and resolution to return home.

Traditionally, the emphasis of the parable has been placed on the lost son. He is the bad boy, the rebel, the outlaw who shames his family. After he ruins his reputation, health, and future, he comes to his senses, faces his failures, and returns home with bowed head and penitent heart. This is the kind of happy ending that we like to read about. But the parable does not end with verse 24. Jesus continues his story beyond the party. There is another character in the parable, and his seldom-told story is a surprise to most casual readers. It is the story of the older brother.

The older brother certainly has praiseworthy virtues:

1. He is *loyal* in that he stays with his father when the younger brother leaves home.
2. He is *industrious*; in fact, he is working in the field when his brother comes back.
3. He is *faithful*, serving dependably in his brother's absence.
4. He is *righteous*, to the extent that he does not disobey his father's commands.

When we dig deeper, we find that there is more to the older brother's character than meets the eye. Like the Pharisees described by Jesus in Luke 18, the older brother trusts in his own righteousness, which is the very definition of self-righteousness. In fact, he has several character flaws that are instructive to examine. Thus, he becomes the object of the last part of Jesus' lengthy parable.

#### He confuses righteousness with rule-keeping.

The older brother's character appeals to us at first because he is the "obedient" son who remains at home and does his duty while his brother is squandering a large part of the family estate. Listening to Jesus tell the story were many Pharisees who think like the elder brother. Jesus aims His parable at them. The Pharisees are the opposite of the prodigal son. They are the very image of the older brother in the parable.

#### He equates righteousness with moral goodness.

The older brother in the parable feels that his morality is above question, yet he feels no compassion for his penitent brother. He cannot see his own selfishness, arrogance, and ingratitude because he does not look in the mirror.

#### He wants praise for his good works.

The older brother wants to be praised for his faithful service to the family. We can imagine how slighted and angry he feels when he sees his brother get the

attention that he craves for himself. This is classic jealousy. Through the example of the older brother, Jesus draws our attention to the Pharisees who have their own exclusive fellowship. He makes the point that we need to seek less attention for ourselves and stop condemning others.

He is ungrateful for his blessings.

In his self-righteousness, the older brother sees his place in the family as nothing more than joyless servitude: "Look, all these years I have been slaving for you" (Luke 15:29). This son finds no joy in working with his father. His work is a burden, a thankless duty to be performed.

He is unwilling to show mercy.

In his self-righteousness, the older brother has neither love nor mercy for His brother who has been lost. Notice he does not call him "my brother" when he speaks to their father. He calls him "*this son of yours*" (v. 30). The parable suggests he knows some details of his brother's activity. Yet, there has been no mission of mercy to rescue him and bring him home. If one has never known the need for mercy for himself, he is not apt to show mercy to others. The return of his younger brother produces no joy or gratitude in the mind of the older brother—only frustration, judgment, and anger.

Recall that Jesus is addressing the Pharisees in the parable. He would say to them on another occasion: "*Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former*" (Matthew 23:23). Although it is unlikely that many of the Pharisees repented of their self-righteous attitude after hearing this parable, we can take heart that Jesus is also speaking to us and will continue to seek us when we wander away from the fold.

**CONCLUSION**

Most Christians, if they were honest, would admit to having on occasion the attitude of pretentious moral superiority. Too often, we regard some of the people outside our circle as spiritually inferior. In such moments, we become the self-righteous older brother.

Perhaps it would help us to see our own place in the "pearl of parables" if we consider that this parable told by Jesus is really the story of *three* sons. There was the lost son who returned home. There was the son who was lost at home. And lastly, there was the Son who told the story—the Son who left home to seek and rescue His lost brothers.

Jesus left His Father's house to seek the lost for His Father. He was the opposite of the elder brother in the parable. That elder brother watched his father mourn over the son who had gone astray. But he did not go after him for his father. He was not there when his brother's funds were depleted. He was not there when his younger sibling hit bottom. He was not there at the swine trough, saying, "Come on, brother, let's go home." He was willing to allow his brother to remain lost. Jesus gave up heaven to "go off into a distant country" to rescue us from sin. Let us not forget these most precious words of Jesus: "*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost*" (Luke 19:10).

Adapted from John Sartelle

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NOTES