THE CITY ON A HILL

Lessons from the Parables of Jesus

R. Herbert

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Second edition, revised and expanded

By R. Herbert

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Cover: The lights of the city of Tiberius reflecting in the Sea of Galilee. Photograph © by Asaf Eliason.

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INTRODUCTION:
THE PARABLES OF JESUS

Although they are simply worded, the parables of Jesus have been described as some of the most profound religious teachings ever made. They certainly illuminate the gospel he proclaimed, but although many parables are easy to understand – some being interpreted by Jesus himself – others are not so clear, have multiple possible meanings, and deserve careful study. In fact, all the parables represent gems of instruction which richly repay the time we spend in reading them and meditating on their principles. This book is designed to help you to do that, to provide information that can enable you to better understand the parables, and to see ways in which they can be applied in the Christian life.

Why Parables?

The Greek word *parabolē* from which we get the English word "parable" originally meant "to set beside" – in other words "to make a comparison" – because a parable usually tells a story that makes a point about something else. This comparison helps to make abstract concepts more concrete and understandable. Rather than tell us what forgiveness is, for example, a parable paints a word picture to show us what forgiveness looks like in everyday life.

Although we are most familiar with the parables found in the teachings of Jesus, parables were sometimes given in the Old Testament to emphasize important points (see the Appendix to this book: "The Parables of the Old Testament"). The parables were ideally suited for religious instruction because they usually make a comparison between an important principle and an example taken from everyday life that anyone can understand. They are also good teaching tools because of their simplicity, and often the striking nature of the stories themselves makes them easy to remember.

Yet parables can also be used to conceal important truths from those who are not ready or able to receive them, and this is how

Jesus often used them in his teaching. Many times he would speak to the crowds in parables and afterwards the disciples would ask what the stories meant. On one occasion they asked him why he did this:

> *The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" He replied, "Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them … This is why I speak to them in parables: Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand."* (Matthew 13:10-13 NIV, and see also Mark 4:33-34)

Grasping this basic principle helps us to understand why some of the parables are not, in fact, as simple as they may seem, and why we do need to focus on them to recover the message Jesus had for his intended hearers.

Parables in the Gospels

The exact number of parables Jesus gave is not known, and there is considerable difference among the four evangelists in how the parables are stressed. Luke records the most (around 24-33 depending on how they are counted). Matthew also records a large number (about 24-29), but Mark records only a few (about 8-10). John – perhaps because he focuses more on the events and actions of Christ's ministry – does not record any true parables at all, though he does record two statements of Jesus that are parable-like (John 10:1-16; 15:1-8), and he also uses the similar word *paroimia* – a "proverb" or "figure of speech" – on three other occasions (John 10:6; 16:25; 16:29).

Notice that when we say that there are "about" 24-33 parables in Luke, etc., it is because the exact number depends on which stories we consider to be true parables and how we divide them. While some parables are distinctive and different from all the rest, others have the same or a very similar message and seem to have been given together as complementary examples – such as the Parable of the New Cloth and the Parable of the New Wine – which

could be regarded as separate parables or just different parts within the same one. This is the reason for the range of numbers given above and for differing lists of parables that you may have seen.

Perhaps surprisingly, although there is some overlap, only about six parables are recorded in more than one of the accounts of Jesus' life. But each of the first three Gospels has some parables that are unique to it (about ten are found only in Matthew, two only in Mark, and some eighteen only in Luke).

Types of Parables

The parables have been classified in many ways. Sometimes they are grouped in a complex manner based on their literary types, the metaphors, similes, and other literary features they utilize, etc. But this approach has the disadvantage of making something simple more complex, and it often teaches us little or nothing about the parables themselves.

At other times parables have been organized in groups such as those teaching about the kingdom of God, redemption, forgiveness, etc. But if we try to group parables by their meaning, in many cases we find more than one message in a given story (consider the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins which seems to stress preparation, watchfulness, dedication, judgment, etc.), so there is considerable overlap between many of them.

This book takes a simpler approach by grouping the parables not by their literary types or presumed messages, but by the locations in which they are set. Jesus built his parables around everyday settings that his hearers all experienced or knew about – ranging from objects and events found in homes, to those found in gardens and vineyards, fields and farms, in the temple, palace, and market place, and finally in the banquet halls and halls of judgment where important events were celebrated and came to pass.

Using this simple structure enables the reader to quickly and easily locate the section of the book in which a given parable is discussed, and to think about the various stories in terms of the setting Jesus used for each parable.

Learning from the Parables

Studying the parables of Jesus is as simple as reading them and thinking about their meanings, but there are certain things we can do that help enrich the experience. Often, key facts about the cultural setting of the parables can greatly increase our understanding of them, and so historical and archaeological information, the meanings of the Greek or other words used in the stories, and other facts are occasionally mentioned in this book when these can be helpful.

Some parables, although they may be very different stories, have similar themes and seem to repeat the same point. The Parable of the Lost Coin is an example. This parable is part of a trilogy that Jesus gave regarding his work of seeking and finding the spiritually lost. The other two stories in this trilogy are the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost (or Prodigal) Son. These parables all have a similar message, but when we look at them closely they also make slightly different points as well. Each one stresses a different aspect of the overall lesson. We can increase our understanding of the parables by looking for differences between similar parables, and similarities between some that are quite different – something this book will point out as we go along.

The parables recorded in the Gospels of the New Testament are like polished gems that can be turned and viewed in many ways. It is our hope that in reading this book you will profit from turning them around in your own mind and viewing them from different angles. We hope you will find the book profitable in learning to see how much the parables can teach us regarding the message of Jesus and how we may become better disciples by listening to and understanding their carefully crafted messages.

R. Herbert, Ph.D.

PART ONE:
THE HOME

1. PARABLE OF THE LIGHTS

(CITY ON A HILL AND LAMP ON A STAND)

> *"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."* (Matthew 5:14-16 and also Mark 4:21; Luke 8:16-17; 11:33-36)

The Parable of the Lights is one of the first parables Jesus is recorded as having given and is unusual in several ways. It is not in standard parable form so it is not always regarded as a true parable, though the passage has a number of parable-like qualities and is often counted as one. It is also unusual in that it utilizes two different images to make its point – giving it two distinct halves which are sometimes counted as separate parables. Finally, it appears in slightly different forms in all of the first three Gospels, but its central message of the responsibility of Christ's disciples to act as a "light" – to serve as a positive influence in the world – is the same in each.

The source of the "light" that the disciples are urged to disseminate is, of course, God himself. Although the Parable of the Lights is not included in the fourth Gospel, the apostle John recorded Jesus' own words "*I am the light of the world*" (John 8:12) and affirms that Christ is "*The true light, which gives light to everyone…*" (John 1:9). In the introduction to the parable, Jesus makes clear that his disciples, having been given that light and shining by "reflection," as we often say, are now also to be the light of the world.

The responsibility to "shine" is a large one, and Jesus outlines two areas in which it is to be fulfilled. First, he uses the analogy of a city set on a hill (Matthew 5:14). Many of the villages and cities of ancient Judea were set on the tops of hills and the sides of mountains and were visible at night from a great distance. The

analogy represents the great potential reach of a disciple's influence. Nineteenth century missionaries often took this verse as a symbol of their far-flung work through distant lands. It is encouraging that in our own age Christians can take advantage of mass-communication methods, and especially the internet, to let their light shine with a truly global reach.

The second analogy, that of the lamp set on a stand (vs.15), looks at the same responsibility of the disciple to reflect the light of Christ, but in a closer setting – that of the home or workplace. In comparing the disciple to a small household lamp (Greek *luchnos*), the parable paints a simple yet vivid picture of our responsibility to reflect Christ in our homes (as well as in our places of work, relaxation, and worship). In terms of understanding this responsibility, Luke's version of the parable includes an interesting additional part of Jesus' discussion:

> *"Your eye is the lamp of your body … If then your whole body is full of light, having no part dark, it will be wholly bright, as when a lamp with its rays gives you light."* (Luke 11:34-36)

This added thought reminds us of the apostle Paul's words: "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened …" (Ephesians 1:18). Both passages show the importance of coming to a clear understanding of the word of God and God's will, if we are to illuminate others (see also Ephesians 5:8-14, especially vs. 10).

One of the most encouraging things about this double parable is the fact that the sources of light mentioned by Christ are all minor ones. But a little light goes a long way – you can see a candle in clear dark conditions over three miles away at ground level. The ancient household oil lamp was small and seemingly insignificant, yet in the depths of night such a small lamp provided illumination for those around it. And even the glittering light of the city on the hill – visible at great distances – was only composed of many such small lights.

2. PARABLE OF THE LOST COIN

> *"What woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."* (Luke 15:8-10)

The moral of this story is simple enough. It uses the lost coin as a metaphor for someone who is spiritually lost, and who repents – as Jesus explained himself. But it is the extent of what the parable teaches that we may miss.

In the modern world we tend to think of coins as usually having little value compared to banknotes and other forms of financial currency. Coins are often, for us, the "small change" of what we have. But in the ancient world this was not so. In a world without "paper money," coins were all the wealth people might have. In the Greek of Luke's Gospel, the ten coins are ten silver *drachmas*, each being a substantially important coin for most people – one *drachma* was equivalent to a Roman *denarius*, which represented about a day's wages for a workman. For many peasant families, the ten drachmas the woman had might well have been the entire "family savings" at a given time.

But there is another more specific and perhaps more likely identification for these coins. This parable is one of a group of three similar stories Christ told at the same time. The other two are the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost Son or the "Prodigal Son." The first of these is not gender specific, but the second relates specifically to a son in a setting that applied only to males in that society. Jesus also included this story of the woman who lost one of her coins in the "lost trilogy," and the ten coins may have been the woman's dowry. This is perhaps especially likely as the parable says that when the woman found the coin she called her

friends and neighbors to rejoice with her. In the Greek the "*friends and neighbors*" are both grammatically feminine, and this parable seems to have been given with female hearers in mind.

Whether the ten coins represent the woman's savings or were her marriage dowry, when we understand the importance of one-tenth of either of these amounts we better understand the intensity of the woman's searching and her happiness when she found the lost coin.

So, although the parable does not differ in its overall theme from that of the Lost Sheep or the Parable of the Lost Son, the story of the lost coin underscores in a particularly strong manner – especially to the women to whom the parable seems to have been directed – the great importance of what was lost. Just as the woman still had nine coins left, but could not be happy with one lost, the story tells us not only that the angels rejoice in the finding of one who was lost, but also stresses the great importance of that one individual. As the apostle Peter wrote: *"The Lord … is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance"* (2 Peter 3:9).

3. PARABLE OF THE LEAVEN

(THE YEAST)

> *He told them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened." (Matthew 13:33)*

One of the shortest parables, the story of the leaven (yeast) appears clear in its basic meaning, but it may have other lessons that we should consider.

Like the Parables of the Lost Coin and the Lost (Prodigal) Son, this parable is part of a group – in which some parables are based on a man's agricultural activities and others on a woman's domestic activities. In this case, the Parable of the Leaven is one of a pair with that of the tiny mustard seed that eventually grows into a great shrub. In both cases – the growing seed and the spreading of the leavening yeast through the flour – the parables appear to have the same basic meaning of the growth of the kingdom of God from a small beginning to its final fulfillment. With this positive interpretation, just as the leavening yeast works unseen within the dough, the parable indicates that the Spirit of God would permeate and work within the lives of those individuals who collectively comprise the growing kingdom.

But if this is its only meaning, the Parable of the Leaven is unusual in that apart from this one possible exception, leavening is only used symbolically as a metaphor of *un*righteousness throughout the Old and New Testaments (for example, Luke 12:1 and 1 Corinthians 5:6-8). This does not mean that Christ could not have used it in a positive manner in this parable, of course; though many scholars feel that a negative understanding of the leaven is actually intended in that while the mustard seed parable clearly indicates the growth of the kingdom of God in the present age, the leavening parable would indicate the spread of negative or corrupting elements within the growing kingdom.

This meaning is all the more possible when we consider Christ's warning to his disciples of the "*leavening*" of the Pharisees (Matthew 16:6-12; Mark 8:15), and in Galatians 5:9 Paul specifically uses leaven as a type of false doctrine spreading within the church. The context of the parable may also apply, because in Matthew it follows the Parable of the Weeds and Wheat, which is a picture of false believers intermingled with true. Perhaps the most suggestive clue, however, is that within the parable itself we find that the woman does not simply put the leaven in the flour. The Greek word used is *enkrupto*, meaning to hide or conceal, and it is from the root of this word that we take the English words "encrypt" and "encryption." In this case the woman might be seen as surreptitiously spreading the leaven of false doctrine through the church.

Not having any firm indication of these alternate negative and positive meanings, perhaps we might best understand the parable in the simple sense of the growth of the kingdom from small beginnings to its future fulfillment. But the possible negative meaning should also be kept in mind.

A final question we might ask concerns the very great amount of flour that the parable mentions. The large quantity of flour ("three measures" or about sixty pounds) is the amount specified in the Old Testament as a grain offering (Leviticus 14:10), but it is an amount that would produce enough bread to feed perhaps a hundred people. This aspect of the parable may reflect the idea that like the mustard seed which grows into a "*tree*" (Matthew 13:31-32), so the large amount of flour signifies the great extent of the kingdom of God.

4. PARABLE OF THE CLOTH AND WINE

(NEW CLOTH AND NEW WINE)

> *He also told them a parable: "No one tears a piece from a new garment and puts it on an old garment. If he does, he will tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine desires new, for he says, 'The old is good.'" (Luke 5:36-39 and also Matthew 9:14-17; Mark 2:21-22)*

This double parable – or pair of complementary parables – was given by Jesus when the Pharisees and scribes asked him why his disciples did not fast like the disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees themselves. Jesus replied that as long as he was present with his followers, they had reason to rejoice, but that his followers would fast in the future when he was no longer with them. He then proceeded to give these two short word pictures which tie into his answer.

Both parts of the parable – if we consider them as halves of the same one – clearly teach the same principle, that new things cannot easily be joined with old or damage will be done. This is the case with either old cloth or old wineskins that have stretched as far as they will – both will tear if subjected to something that makes them stretch any further. The point is simple enough, but there are two opposing interpretations of these stories.

Most commentators have seen the parable as relating to the "new" teachings of Christianity which could not be contained within the old forms of Judaism. Sometimes this view was taken to

extreme levels. In the early second century the heretic Marcion used these texts in support of his idea that Jesus was the savior sent by God, but he rejected the God of Israel and the Hebrew Bible. Most followers of the view that the parable relates to the new ideas of Christianity have not seen the Old and New Testament as mutually exclusive, of course, rather that Christianity is new in the sense of development of the same religion and further revelation of the same God.

But there is a difficulty with this view in the words that Jesus added to the end of the parable – that *"… no one after drinking old wine desires new, for he says, 'The old is good'"* (Luke 5:39). This conclusion has led some scholars to prefer a different view of this parable – that the old wineskins and the old cloth actually represent the biblical teachings followed by Jesus' disciples, and the new wine and unshrunk cloth represent what would be "new" for them – the specific practice of fasting twice a week as the Pharisees did. While it might seem strange at first, this view is based on the context of the parable which is one of discussion of whether the disciples should fast. If the parable is viewed in this manner, the point would not be that Christianity could not fit into Judaism. Rather, it would be that regular fasting would be difficult for the disciples as they continually travelled with Christ. Such fasting might well have been more than they could handle in those circumstances.

It might seem difficult to decide which of these interpretations of the Parable of the Cloth and Wine seems best, but if we choose the first understanding we are reminded of the new and unique aspects of Christianity which are an integral part of our faith. If we choose the second interpretation – which does fit the context of the passage better – we are reminded of the considerate nature of Christ himself. From either perspective we are reminded of the character of Jesus and the message he brought.

5. PARABLE OF THE TREASURES NEW AND OLD

> *And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old." (Matthew 13:52)*

In this parable, Jesus instructed his disciples regarding the role of the teacher of the biblical law; and although the parable consists of only a single short comparison, we can learn from it by considering its details.

The scribes of first century Judea preserved and copied the Scriptures so they were intimately familiar with them (Ezra 7:6) and were able to draft legal documents such as business, marriage, and inheritance contracts based on biblical law. In the New Testament they are often called "*teachers of the law*" (Mark 2:6; etc.), and although many of the scribes opposed Jesus – perhaps out of professional jealousy – he nevertheless acknowledged their position as teachers who sat "*in Moses' seat*" (Matthew 23:2) as interpreters of the Law.

But in this parable Jesus does not specify every scribe – rather every scribe who was "*trained for the kingdom of heaven*." The word "trained" is translated from a Greek word meaning "being made a student" or "...a disciple," so he was clearly indicating those scribes who were sincerely dedicated to learning God's way.

The parable compares such a scribe to a householder or "master of a house" who "*brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old*." To understand the core of the parable, we should realize that the word "treasure" does not mean the precious stones or metals we usually think of as treasure – the kind of thing which is mentioned by Matthew earlier in the same chapter in the Parable of the Hidden Treasure. In this case "treasure" means more a place for valuable things – a treasury or storeroom. In a regular household of the

kind mentioned in the parable, the storeroom was the place in which the household supplies, valuables and stored food were kept.

The "*new"* and *"old*" mentioned in the parable could refer to any old and new items as they are needed, but the analogy applies especially well to items of food. New and old food would refer to both dried and preserved foods as well as fresh food recently placed in the storeroom. Even without modern knowledge of nutrition, ancient homeowners still knew the desirability of providing their households a mixed diet, and this – at the spiritual level – is exactly what this parable prescribes.

Christ tells us through the parable that the teacher of the law who understands God's kingdom brings out both old and new truths as the spiritual "food" he provides. This principle is the basis of what Jesus taught in Matthew 5 where he reminds his listeners that:

> *"…anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."* (Matthew 5:19 NIV)

Although Christians understand that the ceremonial law of the Old Testament has been superseded in the person of Christ, he himself reminds us of the value of the deeper, lasting principles of God's law as found in the Old Testament as well as the "new" understandings and principles taught in the New Testament. The parable reminds us that a full understanding of the kingdom of God is based on a full understanding of his words – old and new.

6. PARABLE OF THE WISE AND FOOLISH BUILDERS

(TWO BUILDERS, HOUSE ON THE ROCK)

> *"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."*
> *(Matthew 7:24–27 and also Luke 6:46-49)*

This well-known parable was recorded by both Matthew and Luke with slight differences. Luke's version is given after the Parable of the Cloth and Wine, without any particular setting, whereas Matthew places the parable about the two builders at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. The small differences in wording between the two versions may indicate that they were given on different occasions, however.

Although only Matthew speaks of rain and wind, both versions of the parable identify flooding as the key force which destroys the weaker house. The topography of many areas of Judea was such that the steep hills and narrow valleys frequently caused forceful runoff floods when rains did occur on the highlands. As a result, many buildings erected in otherwise choice locations, but on sand or other insecure soils, would have their foundations quickly eroded if a flood occurred. However, as the parable suggests, buildings erected on solid rock would stand even if the flood waters hit them directly and continued to swirl around them.

Ironically, it was not hard to find and utilize a rock foundation for a home in Palestine, but some would not choose one for reasons

of convenience – so that they could build close to their fields, for example. Luke, with his characteristic eye for detail regarding people's actions, describes the wise builder who *"dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock,"* showing that hard work was sometimes needed in order to utilize a secure foundation. But again, a solid foundation was available to any builder who was willing to do the work to find one.

The meaning of the parable is made clear in Jesus' own words: *"Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them"* is like the wise builder (Luke 6:47), while everyone who hears the words but does not do them is compared to the *"foolish man who built his house on the sand"* (Matthew 7:26). The rains, wind and flood that come against the houses clearly symbolize problems and persecutions which prove disastrous for those who do not have a firm spiritual foundation. For those who heard Jesus' parable, the nature of that foundation of rock would have been clear. The Old Testament frequently speaks of God himself as a Rock (Deuteronomy 32:4; Psalm 18:2, 46; etc.), and the apostle Paul uses the same analogy regarding spiritual foundations:

> *"By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ."* (1 Corinthians 3:10-11 NIV)

But the central teaching of the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders is not just the value of a firm foundation. It speaks also to the difference between nominal and actual Christianity. Luke opens the parable with the words of Jesus: *"Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?"* (Luke 6:46), and Matthew also records that before giving the parable Jesus said: *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven"* (Matthew 7:21).

7. PARABLE OF THE STRONG MAN

> *"When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armor in which the man trusted and divides up his plunder." (Luke 11:21-22 NIV and also Matthew 12:29; Mark 3:27)*

This seemingly strange parable appears in a setting in which the opponents of Jesus, after he casts out demons, accuse him of being in league with "*Beelzebul, the prince of demons,*" (Luke 11:15) and gaining his power from him. Jesus replied to this attack by stating that: *"Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls. And if Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? …"* (Luke 11:17-18).

Jesus then followed this statement by telling the Parable of the Strong Man, so the immediate context would suggest – as most commentators have said – that the "*strong man*" of the parable signifies Satan who is overcome by "*someone stronger*" – Christ himself. This interpretation certainly works well in context but is sometimes criticized because it leaves unclear the identity of the "*armor*" the strong man trusts in, and also the strong man's "*plunder*" or goods that the stronger man divides.

However, we must be careful in approaching the parables that we do not deny a clear interpretation of the overall message simply because certain details are not clear. There is always a danger of over-interpreting parables – as many Christians did during the Middle Ages – so that every detail of every parable is seen as symbolically significant. It is doubtless better to admit we do not understand a detail than to invent a meaning for it that might not have been intended. On the other hand, in this particular parable it could easily be that the "*armor*" of the "*strong man*" mentioned by Christ referred simply to the spiritual forces that were part of his overall discussion. In the same way, the plunder of the strong man

that someone stronger takes could refer to those held "captive" by Satan. While this might seem to be an allegorical interpretation, it has some basis. In giving this short parable Christ may well have had in mind the words of the prophet Isaiah:

> *"Can the prey be taken from the mighty, or the captives of a tyrant be rescued? For thus says the Lord: "Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken, and the prey of the tyrant be rescued, for I will contend with those who contend with you, and I will save your children."* (Isaiah 49:24–25)

If these words of Isaiah lay behind the parable as given by Jesus, then the "*plunder*" of the strong man could certainly represent the captives of Satan – the very ones that Christ was rescuing in the exorcisms we are told that he carried out.

A final detail to consider here is that Jesus was accused of casting out demons by the power of "*Beelzebul*," and the word *Beelzebul* means "House of Ba'al" (the false god). So the "*strong man's house*" that is broken into by "*someone stronger*" also ties into the point that Christ was directly overcoming the one by whom he was accused of being helped.

8. PARABLE OF THE FRIEND IN NEED

(FRIEND AT MIDNIGHT)

Then Jesus said to them, "Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.' And suppose the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need." (Luke 11:5-8 NIV)

This parable appears in the Gospel of Luke immediately after Jesus gives his disciples the "Lord's Prayer" and is clearly a continuation of his teaching on how to pray.

Three cultural aspects help to explain the details of the parable. First, in the ancient Near East, ovens were fired and bread was usually baked in the early morning hours before the heat of the day – so by nightfall there might well be no bread left in a home, and people would borrow from their neighbors if more was needed. Second, and also because of the heat of the days, it was not unusual for people to wait till evening to set out on a journey and to arrive at their destination later in the night. Finally, Near Eastern custom was such that if someone arrived at one's home after a long journey, it would be regarded as shameful not to offer the person food. This seems to be the situation in which the man in the parable finds himself, so he goes to his friend's house late at night to request food for his guest.

The obvious lesson in the parable is that of persistence in prayer, something Jesus taught on multiple occasions and in other parables (such as the Parable of the Persistent Widow). But

perhaps we may find other lessons in this particular parable as well. For one thing, we see in the action of the friend that he was doing everything he could do himself – going to a friend's house, even late at night, and asking tirelessly until he received a positive answer. The Greek word translated as "shameless audacity" in the NIV – regarding the way in which the man continues to ask his friend's help – is translated "boldness" or "persistence" in some other versions of the New Testament, but it really does convey an attitude that goes beyond simple persistence to a level which might even seem audacious or rude.

This, Jesus tells us, is the kind of persistence we should have in prayer — the confident boldness we also see in the story of the woman of Syrophoenicia who boldly persisted in asking Jesus' help till he rewarded her for exactly this attitude (Mark 7:25-30; Matthew 15:21-28; and see also Hebrews 4:16).

But we should also remember a final detail of this story: it is not based on the friend needing bread for himself, but for someone else. So an additional lesson we can perhaps draw from this parable is that we can often be the answer to someone else's need only if we are willing to persist on their behalf. That is what intercessory prayer is all about, and this small parable reminds us to pray for others not only tirelessly, but also with true boldness.

PART TWO:

GARDEN, VINEYARD, AND ESTATE

9. PARABLE OF THE UNFRUITFUL FIG TREE

(BARREN FIG TREE)

> *Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' 'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"* (Luke 13:6-9 NIV)

Many of those to whom Jesus spoke this parable doubtless knew that the Hebrew prophets frequently used the fig tree as a symbol of Judah (see, for example, Jeremiah 29:17; Hosea 2:12; 9:10). Using this same imagery, Jeremiah 8 talks of the sins of Jerusalem and especially those of its religious leaders, then pronounces a judgment against them: *"'I will take away their harvest, declares the Lord.... There will be no figs on the tree, and their leaves will wither. What I have given them will be taken from them'"* (Jeremiah 8:13 NIV).

Understood in this manner, the parable shows that Jesus was offering the people of Judea one final opportunity to repent and produce the "*fruit*" that God expected of them. The "*three years*" (meaning the three years immediately preceding) would then refer to the period of Jesus' own ministry in which he had repeatedly spoken of the need for godliness.

The parable can be directly connected to the story recorded in Mark 11:12-14 in which Jesus cursed an actual fig tree, just outside Jerusalem, for not producing fruit. The tree was dead the next time the disciples passed by (Mark 11:20-24), and this miracle formed a graphic illustration of the parable itself. God waited patiently for the descendants of Judah to produce the fruits of repentance he

commanded, but when they did not, the judgment placed on them was severe.

We can apply the principle of the parable to ourselves, of course, in that God does work patiently with us, but we should never confuse that patience with a lack of desire on God's part that we produce fruit in our spiritual lives. In this sense, we might notice that the gardener of the parable states that he will both dig around the fig tree and also fertilize it. God has two major ways of getting our attention and promoting growth in us – he may shake up our world (the equivalent of digging up the soil around the tree) or he may provide positive impetus (the equivalent of fertilizer) to nudge us to "bear fruit."

Unfortunately, neither of these methods worked effectively with the people of ancient Judah or those of Judea in Christ's day and so, like the fig tree of Jerusalem that Jesus cursed, they died without fruit. In our own lives this story can perhaps help us to realize what is happening when we are being "dug around" or given extra spiritual encouragement. Either case is an invitation to bear fruit, or more fruit, in our lives and can be an opportunity for us to produce the kind of full and meaningful harvest God intends for us.

10. PARABLE OF THE BUDDING FIG TREE

(BUDDING TREES, TREES IN LEAF)

And he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." (Luke 21:29-33 and also Matthew 24:32-35; Mark 13:28-31)

This parable is universally understood to have end-time meaning, as Christ gave it after speaking about the end of the age and in direct response to the question *"...when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?"* (Luke 21:7). The only question we face in interpreting the parable – as we will see – is whether its message was of general or specific significance regarding the end times.

Most biblical scholars feel that Jesus' words in this parable were of general end time significance. As he said, just as when we see the trees bud we know summer is near, so when his followers see the various signs that he gave them they would know the end of the age was near.

Some, however, have seen specific significance in the parable because the fig tree was used in the Old Testament – and in Christ's own parable of the unfruitful fig tree – as a symbol of Israel. As a result, these commentators have interpreted the parable to mean that the "fig tree" coming into bud was a symbol of the reestablishment of the nation of Israel in the end times. This has been tied to the idea of the end occurring in the generation immediately following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Israel's capture of east Jerusalem and the Temple Mount area in the Six-Day War of 1967, and other dates – none of which has

proved to have had end-time significance in the succeeding biblical generation of forty years. As a result, some have looked for a "generation" of 80 years.

But against this view we must remember that Christ said nothing directly about Israel in this parable. The fact that he used a fig tree in another parable to signify Israel does not somehow transfer to this one any more than using a coin as a symbol of a "lost" individual in the Parable of the Lost Coin means that a coin always has this significance every time he mentioned one – for example, in his words regarding whether the denarius should be paid to Caesar (Matthew 22:19-21). Most telling against the so-called "specific" interpretation of this parable, though, is the fact that in it Jesus clearly uses the fig tree as a type of trees in general when he continued *"... and all the trees. As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near"* (Luke 21:29-30).

Rather than picturing Israel in this parable, the budding fig tree seems to signify the appearance of the general signs of the end of the age that Jesus gave in Matthew 24:4–24. So it seems better to view the parable as one referring to general indications of the end times, in harmony with what Jesus himself said: *"But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only"* (Matthew 24:36).

11. PARABLE OF THE WORKERS IN THE VINEYARD

(THE GENEROUS EMPLOYER)

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' So the last will be first, and the first last." (Matthew 20:1-16)

One day, when Jesus made his famous statement that it is harder for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God than for *"a camel to*

pass through the eye of a needle," Peter apprehensively asked him: *"See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?"* (Matthew 19:24-27). Jesus responded by telling Peter:

> *"....everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first"* (Matthew 19:29-30).

Jesus then proceeded to tell the parable of the vineyard workers to explain this last point.

The basic meaning of the parable is not difficult to establish. The agricultural workday began around 6:00 a.m., at sunrise, when the first group of laborers began work in this story. The master then brought in more laborers around 9:00 a.m., noon, 3:00 p.m., and even as late as 5:00 p.m. when there would only be an hour or so of usable light in which to work.

Because he planned to pay all these workers the same amount – a silver denarius which was the average payment for a full day's work – the laborers who had worked since sunrise resented what they saw as unequal reward for their work. But the master realized that all the laborers had themselves and their families to feed, so he generously treated all of them alike.

Applying the parable is not quite as simple as understanding the story, however. Some have seen the parable as an illustration that the early laborers represent the Jews, and those brought in later the Gentiles, but there is nothing in the parable or its direct context that suggests this interpretation. The majority of commentators have seen the parable as meaning that those individuals who are converted late in life – even in "deathbed" situations – will earn a reward equal to that given to those converted early.

But this interpretation does not fit well with the many biblical verses showing that although we are saved by grace, we are in fact rewarded according to individual works. Notice, for example, in the Gospel of Matthew: *"For the Son of Man will come in the glory of*

His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works" (Matthew 16:27 NKJV). Being rewarded according to works is also the message of parables such as the Parable of the Pounds and is implicit in others such as the Parable of the Two Sons, so we should perhaps rather view this story as teaching the concept that we receive God's grace as a result of his generosity, not because of how much we have worked to "earn" it.

A final indication that this is the intended meaning of the parable may be seen in its context. Notice that after Peter asked Jesus how the disciples would fare after giving up everything to follow him, Jesus replied first regarding their reward – that in the coming age the disciples would sit on thrones with him, and that anyone who had given up things for their calling would be rewarded "*a hundredfold*" (Matthew 19:29). Jesus then switches to a different thought: *"But many who are first will be last, and the last first"* (Matthew 19:30).

This statement looks past the narrower idea of proportionate reward according to what his disciples had given up and accomplished to the parable that Jesus then gave. There we find a broader concept of the gift of the employer – who clearly represents God – a gift that looks at the willingness and desire of God to give the same salvation to all, by grace, apart from the "rewards" associated with works.

12. PARABLE OF THE WICKED TENANTS

"A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a long while. When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, so that they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. And he sent another servant. But they also beat and treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. And he sent yet a third. This one also they wounded and cast out. Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.' But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours.' And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others." ... The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on him at that very hour, for they perceived that he had told this parable against them, but they feared the people." (Luke 20:9-19)

The main elements in this parable appear to be: (1) the owner of the vineyard – God; (2) the vineyard itself – Judea; (3) the fruit of the vineyard – the spiritual "fruits" God desired to see; (4) the tenants – the Jewish religious leaders; (5) the vineyard owner's servants – the prophets; (6) the vineyard owner's son – Jesus; (7) the other tenants – other Jews who were obedient, the followers of Jesus, or even the Gentiles.

When these correlations are kept in mind, the essential meaning of the parable of the wicked tenants is clear. Luke himself identifies the wicked vineyard workers as the Jewish religious leaders in the verse directly following the parable, and the identities of the other subjects then easily follow. Historically, some have disagreed on the exact nature of the "fruits" the vineyard owner desired –

whether they were physical or spiritual – and some have desired to widen the identity of the tenants to include all of humanity. This wider identification could certainly apply to the story, but Luke makes it clear that the direct correlation was with the high priests and other Jewish religious leaders.

The immediate context in the Gospel of Luke also shows us that the parable was spoken to the people thronging the temple during the final week before the Passover and the death of Jesus. The Jewish religious authorities were already concerned that Jesus was eroding their credibility and authority. This parable doubtless intensified the jealousy and anger associated with those insecurities (Luke 20:19).

We should notice another detail of this story. Using a vineyard as a metaphor to describe Israel and Judah was common in Old Testament and Jewish tradition, and the specific image of the vineyard in this parable seems to be taken from Isaiah 5:1-7 (see the Appendix to this book on "The Parables of the Old Testament"). Reading Isaiah's story of the vineyard alongside Jesus' parable throws light on both passages.

13. PARABLE OF THE TWO SONS

"A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' And he answered, 'I will not,' but afterward he changed his mind and went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him." (Matthew 21:28-32)

In this parable, which is somewhat similar to the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14), Jesus uses the story of two sons to reprimand those who believed they were good people while not realizing that they were, in fact, self-righteous and not obedient at all. The parable makes a strong contrast between these people and those they regarded as "sinners," yet who were now accepting the message of the kingdom of God.

Psychologically the parable is an interesting one in that when we read it, we naturally identify more with the individuals Jesus exonerated, despite their faults. On the other hand, no one finds it easy or pleasant to put themselves in the shoes of the individuals Jesus clearly rebukes. Nevertheless, we can apply this parable in various areas of our own lives. Did we at any point feel a call to do some good work which we delayed, forgot or put aside? The story could apply to us in this or in other circumstances.

And there is another way to approach this parable. Suppose we view ourselves as being *both* sons rather than just one of them. This approach fits well with the Christian understanding that our inherent human nature remains with us and has to be constantly

struggled against (Romans 7:20-25) even when we have received the Spirit of God.

In that sense, we live our lives as both sons on a daily basis – as the son (or daughter) who struggles to accept what we come to see is right but eventually makes the right decision, as well as the son or daughter who may accept what we must do at first, but does not always follow through because we forget our decision or are tempted away from it. This approach fits the details of the story in a number of ways. Note that the son who says "yes" at first seems to be respectful (he says "sir"), yet still fails to do what he should, while the son who is initially rebellious (often the first reaction of our own human nature), finally turns and does what is right.

In its original setting, Jesus' parable was clearly aimed at the seemingly righteous Pharisees, with whom he contrasted individuals who were clearly flawed yet repentant. But it can be helpful to put ourselves in both situations as we read the story in order to remember how our own human nature works and how we must fight to overcome it. It's a simple principle, but one that can help us to profit from a number of parables that contrast right and wrong responses

Meditation on how this particular parable might apply in our own lives can sometimes help us to make right decisions and to continue with them – to be a son or daughter with whom God is able to work.

14. PARABLE OF THE MASTER AND HIS SERVANT

> *"Suppose one of you has a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? Won't he rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'" (Luke 17:7-10 NIV)*

This parable is often said to show that we should not expect a reward from God because we have only done our duty and no more. While this is certainly true – and no matter how virtuous or dedicated to service we might be, we can never place God in our debt – when we look at this passage in context, we see additional meaning in it.

Directly before Jesus gave the parable, his disciples asked something of him: *"The apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith!'"* (Luke 17:5). Jesus replied that if they had faith "*as small as a mustard seed*" (Luke 17:6 NIV) they would be able to do great things and then proceeded to tell this parable.

The context makes it clear that the disciples were not just asking an academic question, "How do we increase our faith?" They were in fact asking Jesus for the *gift* of faith – the direct, painless, no-work-involved transfer of faith from him to them. We see that in replying Jesus first gently reminded them that if they had any faith at all, it should be sufficient to do great things, but then he went on to stress, by means of the parable, that the servant cannot become a "master" overnight. The servant must persist in doing what he or she is called to do with the tools and skills he or she is given before reaching the place where the master is. We see this point in the

clear words that the servant is told: *"wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink."*

So there is a double lesson in humility in this short but meaningful parable. First, we must never expect great reward simply for doing the work we were given to do. This aspect of humility is summarized in the words *"We are unworthy servants."* We also see another lesson in humility when we realize that having great faith and doing great works does not make us great. Although we are called to be sons and daughters of God, the fulfillment of that calling is future in terms of its rewards and privileges. At this point, we must concentrate on being the "*servant of all*" (Mark 9:35) and not expect to be rewarded with powers and spiritual qualities that are more than we presently know how to use.

Finally, however, Jesus does "leave the door open," so to speak, to the possibility that we may be spiritually rewarded for great dedication. The parable gives its judgment on a situation in which we have only complied with our instructions: *"... when you have done everything you were told to do."* But Jesus certainly implied that if we go beyond this level and serve beyond what is required of us, we may be given extra ability to serve.

In this sense, being rewarded by opportunities for greater service involves doing more than expected. That is also the point of the Parable of the Pounds where the faithful servant who has done much is told: *"Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"* (Matthew 25:21 NIV).

15. PARABLE OF THE WISE AND FOOLISH SERVANTS

(FAITHFUL SERVANT, DOORKEEPER)

"Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning, and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them. If he comes in the second watch, or in the third, and finds them awake, blessed are those servants! But know this, that if the master of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have left his house to be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

Peter said, "Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for all?" And the Lord said, "Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom his master will set over his household, to give them their portion of food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed in coming,' and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and get drunk, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces and put him with the unfaithful. And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much

will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more." (Luke 12:35-48 and also Matthew 24:42-51; Mark 13:34-37)

In the Gospel of Matthew this parable comes directly before that of the Wise and Foolish Virgins, and both parables share several aspects in common. Both speak metaphorically of the need to keep our "lamps" burning, and both share the theme of being prepared for the return of the "Son of Man" – which is made explicit in Matthew: *"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come"* (Matthew 24:42 NIV).

In Luke's version, the two halves of the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Servants may appear to be saying the same thing: to be watchful. But there are important differences. In the first half, the parable speaks of the necessity to stay watchful for the return of the master of the house – who will himself serve his servants who are awake on his return – and then switches to say that the master would not have left the house (Matthew 24:43 says he would have stayed awake) if he had known the hour in which a thief was coming. This second statement seems out of place, but it appears in both Matthew and Luke's Gospels (Mark's characteristically short version omits this detail) and seems to be an additional way to stress the necessity of watching.

In the second half of the parable, after Peter asks to whom the parable applies, the point of being prepared is made in yet another way. This time the returning master rewards his servant not just for watching, but for being active in the work he was given to do. This behavior is immediately contrasted with that of a servant who misuses his authority by mistreating others and who focuses on everyday life with an attitude of "eat, drink, and be merry" and does not watch (see also Luke 21:34-36) and who is severely punished as a result.

The parable ends with a caution that much will be required of the individual to whom much is given:

> *"And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating…"* (Luke 12:48)

Here, we see that those who do not know the truth may be punished for their faults at the masters' return, but the punishment will be lighter than that meted out to the servant who knew to watch and to do the work, but did not.

An additional detail is worth noting regarding this parable. Although most translations seem to indicate that the servants are waiting for the master to return from the wedding feast (at its conclusion), the Greek literally refers to him "breaking loose" from the banquet and can be understood to mean that he "slips away" (while the feast is still going on). If we understand the parable in this way, we see a different picture – that of a master who kindly slips away from the feast he is attending to take some of the fine foods back for his servants to enjoy. That would explain why – and what – the master then proceeds to serve the servants.

Overall, the story shares common points with several of Jesus' other parables as well as some rabbinic parables of the time. But its stress on the need for watchfulness and the additional point it makes of the greater responsibility of those who know what is expected of them make this parable all the more powerful in what it teaches.

16. PARABLE OF THE RICH FOOL

(RICH MAN WHO BUILT BARNS)

"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 12:16-21 NIV)

The background to this parable is interesting. Luke tells us that as Jesus was teaching, a young man called out to him, urging him to tell his brother to divide an inheritance with him. According to the Mosaic law (Numbers 27:1-11; Deuteronomy 21:15-17), the firstborn son was to be given a double portion of an inheritance, so this is doubtless a younger son – a greedy younger son – apparently trying to get more than his allotted share. The sons' father must have recently died, and this sets the scene for the parable Jesus tells in response to the young man.

One of the first things we notice about the parable itself is the preponderance of personal pronouns – "I," "my," "myself," etc. – in what the rich man says. He makes reference to himself almost a dozen times in the space of a few short sentences. Clearly, the man is self-centered and greedy. When God blesses him with an abundant crop – more than his barns can hold – instead of giving the excess to the poor or to God, he schemes to build yet larger barns to hold the entire crop and to enjoy the extra abundance for many years in a life of luxury.

The parable does not suggest that there is anything wrong with planning, with building new structures, with retirement, or with saving, but that selfishly keeping all the excess we receive without giving any in return is sinful and, as we see in this case, short-sighted. God required the life of the rich man at that time and any opportunity to give – if he ever wanted one – was lost. Thus Jesus, in setting up the parable, says: *"Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions"* (Luke 12:15).

The core point of the Parable of the Rich Fool is that we are not blessed by God in order to hoard wealth for ourselves. We are blessed to be a blessing to others – a principle we see in both the Old Testament (Genesis 12:2) and in the New (2 Corinthians 9:6-15). While the rich man selfishly refused to give of his excess to those who needed, Jesus points out that, ironically, all the man had would go to others, anyway. The early Christian theologian Augustine (AD 354 – 430) gave a pithy summary of this parable in saying that the rich man was "… proudly disregarding all [the] empty bellies of the poor. He did not realize that the bellies of the poor were much safer storerooms than his barns."

PART THREE:
FIELD, FARM, AND SEA

17. PARABLE OF THE SOWER

(THE FOUR SOILS)

> *"Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." And he said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." (Mark 4:3-9 and also Matthew 13:1-23; Luke 8:1-15)*

After he had given this parable Jesus asked the disciples, *"Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?"* (Mark 4:13). So he apparently considered its meaning straightforward, yet he went on to explain the story to them:

"The sower sows the word. And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." (Mark 4:14-20)

Like other parables that Jesus explained, this one seems clear and its lesson obvious once we know what it is talking about. But we can also learn from the parable's context. Between giving this particular parable and explaining it, Jesus mentioned his reason for speaking to the crowds in parables was that: *"... they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven"* (Mark 4:12). In saying this he quoted a passage from the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 6:9-10) that criticized ancient Israel for its refusal to listen to God's word through his prophets.

So Isaiah was not talking about willing people being held back from salvation, but those who did not wish to hear. And it is these people who are symbolized in the Parable of the Sower by the seed that fell on the rocky ground where it could not take root. In the Gospel of Mark we see this same parable confirming and explaining the reaction of most people to Jesus' teaching up to that point.

A crucial part of this parable by which we can all be encouraged is that those who hear the word and "*bear fruit*" – do so up to thirty, sixty, or a hundred times. The different levels of bearing fruit are not based on the type of soil – all these seeds fell on "*good soil*." But if the seed takes root in us and grows, the amount of "*fruit*" that is produced in our lives is not based on our environment – it is something that we ourselves can do a great deal to determine.

18. PARABLE OF THE WEEDS AND WHEAT

(TARES, WHEAT AND TARES)

He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' So the servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, "Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn."'" (Matthew 13:24-30)

This parable is one of a number Jesus gave based on seeds sown in fields. It follows after the Parable of the Sower and comes before the Parable of the Mustard Seed. Christ had explained the meaning of the Parable of the Sower to his disciples (Matthew 13:18-23), so this one would seem simple enough to interpret using the same general principles given there. But something about the parable puzzled the disciples and Christ had to explain it to them:

"And his disciples came to him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire,

so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear." (Matthew 13:36-43)

Although this is one of the few parables we do not need to try to interpret, as Christ interpreted it for us, we can still utilize additional information on the parable to help us understand its references. The word "tares" used in many older Bibles and commentaries refers specifically to the weeds known as vetches, but it can mean any weed. In the parable the "*weeds*" (Greek *zizania*) were probably darnel (*Lolium temulentum*), often called "poison darnel," a wheat-look-alike weed, which would make it very hard to separate the weeds from the wheat itself as they were growing side by side. By the time the wheat was fully ripe – at the time of harvest, as the parable says – the two plants would be easier to tell apart.

This detail, which would have been understandable to the disciples if Jesus was indicating the darnel weed, would stress the fact that the true and false followers of Jesus – according to Christ himself – are not always easy to distinguish. This was also part of the message of the Parable of the Leaven which he gave at the same time, in which the yeast was spread through the flour and became indistinguishable from it (Matthew 13:33), and the point of the Parable of the Sheep and Goats which, despite their similarities, were separated at the judgment.

These parables all suggest that we should be aware of the reality of false types of Christianity and that we should be humble enough to ask God to be made aware of false ideas and teachings that we ourselves might have inadvertently accepted. The Parable of the Weeds and Wheat also specifically reminds us not to judge others in their understanding of Christianity – as Christ said, the "weeds" were to be left till the harvest – perhaps allowing them opportunity to grow to be truly like the wheat.

19. PARABLE OF THE GROWING SEED

"The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come." (Mark 4:26-29)

This small parable, recorded only in the Gospel of Mark, follows a little after the Parable of the Sower and directly before the Parable of the Mustard Seed. Although this story, like the Parable of the Sower, begins with a man scattering seed on the ground, in this case the seed is specifically said to represent the kingdom of God itself, rather than the individuals who hear the word regarding the kingdom. The story does not consider the different soils on which seed falls, as in the earlier parable, and focuses instead on the germination and growth exhibited by the seed.

The parable reminds us that the farmer, or man scattering the seed, does not control the initial growth process at all. In fact, as the parable states, whether the man sleeps or wakes, night or day, the process of germinating growth occurs naturally and without his help. In this the farmer clearly represents the Christian worker spreading the word of God – work that equates directly with the growth of the kingdom of God. The farmer may have laboriously prepared the field and may spend long hours watering and working with the crop once it is established, but the miracle of the germination of the seed remains completely beyond his control.

In giving this parable with its simple analogy, Christ encouraged his disciples in a number of ways. Although the disciple might feel discouraged by the labor involved in sowing seed that (as in the earlier parable) falls by the wayside, on rocky ground, or among thorns – and consequently does not grow to harvest – the Parable of the Growing Seed reminds us that the process of germination is God's responsibility. At an individual level, we should not try to force others to understand the message of the kingdom – that is the

germination that God provides. Likewise, at the collective level, the worker cannot create the kingdom of God, but can only prepare the ground and help feed and encourage the growth of the crop.

There is also encouragement in the fact that just as we cannot see growth occurring (a principle also found in the Parable of the Barren Fig Tree where the gardener asks for another year to see if the tree will grow and produce), as Christians we should not be discouraged at not seeing immediately obvious growth in our lives or in the work in which we are involved. The growth is occurring, though it may be hidden like that of the germinating seed beneath the soil or only happening slowly, outside our ability to perceive.

We might not see the growth of God's kingdom as we patiently wait, work and watch, but just as that other parable – the Parable of the Mustard Seed – stresses, over time the plant does grow and eventually becomes a "*tree*." In the space of only a few sentences, the Parable of the Growing Seed reminds us of the miracle of unseen growth, encourages Christian disciples in the work they are given to do, and perhaps above all reminds us of the need for patience in doing the work entrusted to us.

20. PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD SEED

> *He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." (Matthew 13:31-32 and also Mark 4:30–32; Luke 13:18–19)*

The short Parable of the Mustard Seed is found in all three of the Synoptic Gospels. However, the Gospel of Matthew gives the most information and includes a related parable before this one (the Parable of the Weeds and Wheat) and after it (the Parable of the Leaven). In the Parable of the Mustard Seed, as in the Parable of the Sower (which occurs in the same chapter in Matthew), the man sowing the seed represents Jesus, the field is the world, and the plant is the kingdom of God.

Mustard plants were common in ancient Palestine, so the details of the analogy Jesus used would be readily understandable to his hearers. Mustard is not really a tree and does not grow as tall as actual trees, but they do grow to the size of shrubs, and the word "shrubs" would probably be a better translation in this verse.

The mustard plant mentioned in the parable is probably the white mustard (*Sinapis hirta*) or black mustard (*Brassica nigra*), which bear quite small seeds usually about 1 to 3 mm (around 3/64 to 1/8 inch) in diameter. The size of these seeds is often a subject of comment by sceptics because of the statement "which is the smallest of all seeds on earth" (Mark 4:31), when many plants have much smaller seeds. The seeds of some orchids, for example, are not much bigger than sand particles. But Christ's words in Matthew specify seeds which were "*planted*" – "garden plants" – so it is clear that he was talking of plants commonly cultivated at that time. Additionally, the Greek in Mark simply states that they are the smallest seeds "*on the ground*" (meaning in the Judean gardens

and fields rather than on the surface of the whole Earth), so there is no real problem in their description.

More important is the way Jesus uses the tiny mustard seed here and in a number of other sayings (Matthew 13:31–32; 17:20–21; Mark 4:30–32; Luke 13:18–19; 17:6) as a simile for the kingdom of God that starts small, but grows great, and also with the meaning that if we have even a mustard seed amount of faith we can accomplish great things (Matthew 17:20). The two images are related and explain each other. It is likely that the reference to the amount of faith like a mustard seed was understood as faith that starts small but grows great. In fact, in Matthew 17:20, while some translations say *"faith as small as a mustard seed,"* the Greek is literally *"faith like a mustard seed"* (so it can mean like a mustard seed in its growth to a large size – just as in the parable) and is so translated by some versions of the Bible.

A final detail to consider is regarding the "*birds*" that the parable says are attracted to sit in the mustard tree. Wild birds are attracted to feed on the seeds of this plant, so the birds Christ mentioned may be simply birds feeding or nesting in the plant when it becomes large. But the "birds" may also be understood as symbols of evil – with which they are identified in the Parable of the Sower in the same chapter of Matthew (Matthew 13:4, 19) and the parallel accounts. Viewed this way, Jesus may have intended his words as a warning regarding wrongful elements and influences that would try to find a home in the Church as it grew and manifested the growing kingdom.

21. PARABLE OF THE LOST SHEEP

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." (Luke 15:1-7 and also Matthew 18:12-14)

This parable does not follow the usual pattern of stories in the form of "A shepherd had a hundred sheep ...", but uses a much more direct and personal approach, beginning: "What man of you ..." This more direct approach to the hearer is also followed, though in a slightly different way, in the parable-like story of the Good Shepherd found in John 10:1-21.

The Parable of the Lost Sheep is the first of a trilogy dealing with the theme of redemption that Jesus gave when the Pharisees and other religious leaders criticized him for eating with "sinners." In the Gospel of Luke this parable was followed by the Parable of the Lost Coin and the Parable of the Lost Son, both of which also convey the same message in slightly different ways. Jesus doubtless taught these parables in a set of three both to emphasize his point and to show different aspects of what he wanted to convey.

In the case of the lost sheep parable, Jesus can easily be identified as the shepherd (as we see in John 10), an identification that connects him to the idea of God as a shepherd who searched for his lost sheep in Ezekiel 34:11–16:

For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered …. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed….”

In ancient Judea, as in many other Near Eastern cultures, society was largely regulated by the forces of shame and honor. In this type of society shame was used in such a way as to enforce a kind of caste system. Not only were “sinners” shamed and shunned, but those who associated with them were also reprimanded. Jesus ignored this self-righteous aspect of the society in which he lived and, as we see in his work and teaching – and particularly in the closing words of this parable – he treated the shunned individuals with the concern exhibited by the shepherd for his lost sheep.

It is interesting to compare Luke’s version of the parable with that of Matthew, which is essentially the same but without the additional context given by Luke. The details Luke provides – that the parable was given as a rebuke to the Pharisees and other religious leaders who grumbled at the fact that Christ mingled with those they regarded as sinners – help us to see the contrast Jesus was making between the negative grumbling of the critical Pharisees and the great rejoicing of the friends of the shepherd when the lost sheep is found and of the joy in heaven when such an individual repents.

22. PARABLE OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD

> *"... he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers." This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. (John 10:1-6)*

As explained in the Introduction to this book, the Gospel of John contains no true parables; but this is the most parable-like of the figures of speech his Gospel does record. We include it here, for the sake of completeness, to show this parable-like use of stories in the fourth Gospel. We see that John himself calls this story a "figure of speech" (vs. 6), but he also records the disciples' reaction of not understanding it – in exactly the same way that the other Gospels record them not understanding the parables Jesus gave.

If this particular figure of speech had followed the parable form, it would have presented the story along the lines of: "There was a sheepfold and men who were robbers attempted to climb over the wall to steal the sheep, but the shepherd of the sheep was admitted to the fold by the gatekeeper and he entered through the gate ..."

We can see that casting the metaphor in parable form does not change its message. But we may perhaps gain an understanding of why the story was not told as a parable in John when we realize that the form he used allows a more direct and perhaps more forceful presentation of its message. Nevertheless, Jesus' hearers did not understand this metaphor and, just as was often the case with the parables, he had to explain it:

So Jesus again said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." (John 10:7-16)

Normally, Jesus only explained the parables to his disciples, often privately, but here we see that he explained the metaphor to the Pharisees to whom he spoke. This also suggests that he had cast the message more directly than in parable form to try to get them to understand what he was telling them.

From our own perspective, because we have the explanation he gave, the parable-like metaphor needs no further explanation, but it is a powerful message that encapsulates much of Christ's teaching. It is a metaphor as old as much of what is said in the Hebrew prophets (Isaiah 40:11, etc.) and one that lies behind the story of the Lost Sheep that Jesus did tell in parable form. This parable-like Good Shepherd metaphor is one of the best-known and loved passages of Jesus' teaching. It is interesting that in early Christian art many of the earliest surviving images of Jesus depict him (clean shaven and with short hair) in the ancient classical tradition of the Greek ram bearer (*kriophoros*) carrying a sacrifice – but as the Good Shepherd carrying the sheep not to sacrifice, but to save.

23. PARABLE OF THE LOST SON

(PRODIGAL SON, RETURNING SON)

And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

"But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "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."' And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And

he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'" (Luke 15:11-32)

The well-known story of the Lost or "Prodigal" (meaning wastefully extravagant) Son is the longest of Jesus' recorded parables and one of the most profound. It follows the Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin as the final member of a trilogy of stories about redemption that were given when the Pharisees and other religious leaders criticized Jesus for mingling with "sinners." Unlike the previous two parables of Luke 15, however, this parable does not stress God's searching for the lost, but rather his willingness to allow the son free moral agency and to wait until the lost son himself desires to return.

The forgiving father of the parable clearly symbolizes God, and it is possible, as some have thought, that the older son represents the Jews and the younger son the Gentiles. But the immediate context of the parable suggests it is far more likely that the younger son symbolizes any and every human who has turned from God and that the elder brother who is jealous and angry at the younger son's acceptance on his return represents the Pharisees and others who resented the "sinners" Christ accepted (Luke 15:1-2).

With this understanding we can see there are many significant details in this story. The younger son's request for his part of the inheritance is not only selfish, but also callous and suggests that the son cannot wait to capitalize on his father's eventual death. The son does not spend his inheritance locally, but *"travels to a far*

country," obviously to get as far from the father's control as possible. The son's actions and style of life eventually lead him to abject poverty, and it is only when he has reached "rock bottom," living with the swine he looks after in order to survive, that he decides to turn his life around. Many of these details reflect back to the Pharisees to whom the parable was given, of course. For them, the idea of living and eating with pigs, which were religiously unclean animals, would have been especially repugnant and showed them, from their own perspective, how far the son had sunk.

The Pharisees' judgmental approach contrasts strongly with what the parable teaches us about God. When the destitute young man finally returns home, it seems that his father had been watching for him daily as he sees and runs to meet his son. In that place and time it was not the custom of successful men to run – that was the job of their servants – yet the fact that the father actually runs to greet his son, just like the celebrations he orders, underscores his desire for his son's return and his full and loving acceptance of the son who was lost.

But the parable does not end with the son's return and joyful acceptance. In some ways this is only the prologue for the main thrust of the story which concerns not the lost son, but his brother. The details of the elder brother's response to his younger sibling's return are illuminating – and so are the details of the father's treatment of the elder son. The elder son is angry and refuses to go in to meet his brother (just as the Pharisees would not meet or eat with their despised "brothers"). His father comes out to him – treating the elder son with the same acceptance he had shown to the younger son. But the elder son's attitude remains negative:

> *'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!'*

How much there is in these few sentences! The elder son catalogs his righteous behavior and contrasts it with the behavior of the younger son. Just like the Pharisees, the older brother looks only at outward actions and not on inward attitudes. His focus is on himself and his righteousness, and the father's treatment of the younger son seems completely unfair to him. Despite the fact that according to law the older son would receive the remaining two-thirds of the inheritance (Deuteronomy 21:17) – twice as much as the younger son had been given – he bitterly resents the single calf sacrificed in his brother's honor.

The elder son does not hear his own resentment and does not see that his attitude is one totally without love and is in fact an attitude of hatred. It is the same attitude that John, the disciple who perhaps best understood Jesus' love for humanity, summarized in saying: "*Whoever … hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes*" (1 John 2:11).

It is in opposition to this attitude that this parable was preached. Yet the Parable of the Lost Son was not an *attack* against the Pharisees. It was a loving reminder to them – a reaching out to them as the father reached out to his elder son, calling him "*my son*," yet reminding him that *"It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found."* The Pharisees needed to learn, as we all must, that God's love is not limited to the righteous.

24. PARABLE OF THE FISHING NET

(DRAG NET, DRAWING IN THE NET)

> *"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Matthew 13:47-50)*

This parable, one of those found only in the Gospel of Matthew, is similar to the story of the weeds and wheat found earlier in the same book in that they both refer to the final judgment. In this case, Matthew tells us that the parable was delivered to the disciples – who included, of course, Peter, Andrew, James, and John who had been fishermen prior to their calling. In any case, Christ explained the parable to the disciples, so its significance is clear to us.

Both edible and inedible fish are caught by a net and must then be separated when they are brought to shore – just as the wheat must be separated from the weeds at the time of harvest. This parable specifically tells us that the two types of fish represent the evil and the righteous, but there is a slight difference between this story and the earlier one of the weeds and wheat. In that parable, the individuals separated out for destruction are those consciously placed within the "field" by the enemy, whereas in this story both good and evil are simply brought in by the same cast of the net.

The Greek word for "net" in this parable (*sagēnē*) represents a weighted "drag net" used from either the shore or more usually from one or two boats on the Sea of Galilee. The boats would sweep the net through an area of water, and then the fishermen would haul the net to shore to sort the fish. It is often said that the "net" represents the net of judgment, but in this parable it is made clear

that the net is like the kingdom of heaven that gathers fish, and it is only when it is "full" that it is taken ashore and the catch sorted. Symbolically, then, the net would also seem to represent the "net" of evangelism. Earlier in the same Gospel, in Matthew 4:18-20, Jesus is recorded as saying to Peter and Andrew, "*Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men*," confirming our understanding of this aspect of the Parable of the Fishing Net.

It is sometimes noted that in modern times the printing press as well as radio and television have served in the capacity of a net through widespread preaching of the gospel, and that today the internet is a truly worldwide "net" used in this work of the kingdom. But ours is simply the job of casting the "net." We must remember, as the similar Parable of the Weeds and Wheat teaches, that the job of sorting the crop – or the "fish" in this instance – is not ours to do.

This parable appears to have been extremely popular among early Christians – so much so that an abbreviated version of it was included in the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas.

PART FOUR:

TEMPLE, PALACE, AND MARKETPLACE

25. PARABLE OF THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR

> *"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18:10-14)*

The two characters in this striking parable were carefully chosen. In the culture of ancient Palestine few people were regarded as more devout than the Pharisees, and few were more hated and viewed as sinful than the tax collectors who worked for the Roman occupation (Matthew 9:10-13). But the parable turns this situation around and condemns self-satisfied and self-righteous religion, personified by the Pharisee, while showing that a repentant tax collector who humbly asks God for mercy is more acceptable in the eyes of God.

The parable is straightforward, yet there are several details which are easy to miss and from which we can learn. First, we should notice the extent of the Pharisee's sense of his own righteousness. He states that he fasted twice a week – more often than was required by his sect – and that he tithed on everything he received – again, being more scrupulous than was required of him, and apparently resulting in excessive behavior such as cutting up small items of food in order to pay ten percent of them (Matthew 23:23).

Despite his outward religiosity, the Pharisee's attitude was clearly one of intense self-righteousness (Matthew 23:25-28). God does not need to be reminded of our good deeds, but this man carefully selects the most choice of them to mention to God. Notice

also that the Pharisee stood by himself to pray. So did the tax collector, but their motives were clearly opposite. While the tax collector stood in lonely shame and isolation, the Pharisee apparently placed himself apart from the other worshippers as a matter of pride and self-elevation. The word “Pharisees” actually means "separated ones” and while this related to their doctrinal positions and legalism, Jesus plays on this meaning in his parable by showing the self-chosen isolation that so often accompanies self-righteousness.

The parable illustrates that the most important difference between the two men in God’s eyes was not their relative levels of righteousness, but their humility or lack of it. The parable also strongly underscores Jesus’ teachings that our righteousness must not be like that of the Pharisees. At one point, Jesus told the Pharisees to their faces: “*… Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you*” (Matthew 21:31). He told his own disciples: “*For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven*” (Matthew 5:20). This powerful parable makes it clear that our ideas of righteousness are not necessarily the same as those of God.

26. PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN

... a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" ... "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise." (Luke 10:25, 29-37)

Since the time of Augustine some Christians have interpreted this parable allegorically, thinking that the injured man represents the "lost soul" and that the Samaritan represented Christ who saved the man. But the context of the parable shows that this is not its primary meaning. After responding to the lawyer's question on how to obtain eternal life, Jesus gave the parable of the Good Samaritan in direct answer to the question "*Who is my neighbor?*" The lawyer had asked this regarding the command of Leviticus 19:18 which states *"...you shall love your neighbor as yourself."* But he and others who were present were doubtless shocked by the answer Jesus gave.

In the culture of ancient Judea the Jews and Samaritans were bitter rivals and often enemies. While the Samaritans saw themselves as the descendants of Jews who had not been taken into captivity and as upholders of the religion of Abraham, the Jews saw them as the descendants of mixed peoples who had been imported into the area at that time and regarded them as imposters in the Jewish faith.

The idea of a Samaritan helping an injured (presumably Jewish) man would have been startling enough to Jesus' hearers, but the additional details of the parable's introduction which show that both a priest and a Levite – the archetypal temple representatives of Jewish religion at the time – ignored the injured man would have been even more shocking.

A question we must ask ourselves in studying this parable is why the priest and the Levite both ignored the injured and abandoned man? It is sometimes said that they may have not have wanted to be made ceremonially unclean, and thus temporarily disqualified from temple service, by contact with a dead body. But these men were both travelling "*down*" from Jerusalem – on the way to Jericho – so they had evidently finished their scheduled round of service in the temple. In any case, the parable also states that the two religious figures moved over to the other side of the road, so they would probably have been unable to tell if the man was in fact dead or injured and needing help.

More likely at issue was the fact that in the time of Jesus, the highway from Jerusalem to Jericho led down through desolate areas frequented by criminals and robbers. Notoriously dangerous for the unwary, the road was sometimes known as the "Way of Blood." It seems likely that despite their religious positions, the priest and Levite both gave in to human fear and the desire to not get involved in a potential problem – especially a situation that might possibly be a carefully staged trap. But Jesus continues the parable by showing not only the religious figures' lack of willingness to help when there may have been real need, but also the kindness of the Samaritan who does help the injured man, transports him to an inn where he can recover, and even pays the costs for this.

The parable may have come to Jesus' mind based on a section of 2 Chronicles which tells of the kindness given to certain Judean captives by men of Samaria whose behavior resembles that of the Good Samaritan at certain points because they:

> *… clothed all who were naked among them. They clothed them, gave them sandals, provided them with food and drink, and anointed them, and carrying all the feeble among them on donkeys, they brought them to their kinsfolk at Jericho, the city of palm trees. Then they returned to Samaria.* (2 Chronicles 28:15)

So the Parable of the Good Samaritan is not primarily an allegory of the process of salvation. Instead, it has a central message regarding a way of life based on concern, helping, sacrifice – and truly loving our neighbor. For the Christian it reminds us not to love our fellow believers to the exclusion of others and, wherever possible, to "*do good to everyone*" (Galatians 6:10).

Perhaps no other parable better reflects the way of life that Jesus taught and lived throughout his ministry. It has certainly had more effect on the world in which we live than any of the other parables: the name "Good Samaritan" has been applied to many hospitals and charitable organizations around the world, and the term has found a place in everyday speech in referring to anyone who does good or assists others in need. The parable remains a powerful summary of Christian ethics, and we should not read it without dwelling on Christ's closing words regarding the Samaritan's actions – that we "*go, and do likewise.*"

27. PARABLE OF BUILDING THE TOWER AND THE KING AT WAR

"For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:28-33)

In this small parable with two distinct halves, Jesus gave back-to-back examples of the potential problems resulting from a lack of planning. The first example, of building a tower without first counting the cost, is sometimes thought to be based on a failed building project in Jerusalem planned by Pontius Pilate – an identification that may be possible if the allusion is not to building a watchtower on a private estate or vineyard. In either case, the principle being taught is straightforward, and the example expands upon the concept of building on a firm foundation given in the Parable of the Two Builders (Matthew 7:24-27). In that parable the focus is the nature of what we build upon; in this parable it is our spiritual preparation and dedication that is at issue, even if we have a proper basis for our faith.

In the second example that Jesus gives, he does appear to make an allusion to a specific event of his time. King Herod Antipater (c. 21 BC – AD 39), known by the nickname Antipas, was the first century ruler under the Romans of Galilee and Perea on the east side of the Jordan. Antipas divorced his first wife, who was the daughter of King Aretas IV of the neighboring kingdom of Nabatea,

to marry his own brother's wife Herodias (a marriage that Luke 3:18-20 tells us was condemned by John the Baptist). Antipas' divorce added further friction to a dispute he already had with King Aretas over territory on the border of their kingdoms. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, Antipas declared war on Aretas without proper planning, and his army was routed by the larger forces of the other king. These contemporary events would have been clear in the minds of Jesus' hearers and would have made the parable of the unplanned war seem particularly real.

Many commentators explain the verbal pictures used in this parable as simply prompting us to count the cost before engaging in the struggle against the many forces that "*war*" against the follower of Christ: not only those of our own human nature, but also external physical and spiritual forces (Ephesians 6:12). But if that is the only meaning, the allusion to asking for "*terms of peace*" when realizing one is outnumbered does not seem to make sense. Other commentators see the parable differently – that the king with a much stronger force represents God, with whom we should ally ourselves rather than becoming his enemy. In this case the "*terms of peace*" make better sense and perhaps reflect the words of Jesus that precede this parable on being willing to renounce everything that we have:

> "*If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple."* (Luke 14:26-27)

The spiritual costs of building a "*tower*," like the cost of engaging in a "*war*," Jesus tells us, are those of being willing to give up family, friends, possessions, position, or anything else that might be necessary in order to succeed in what we set out to do – though, as biblical scholar Joachim Jeremias has written, this double parable is an "exhortation to self-examination" rather than to planned self-denial.

28. PARABLE OF THE POUNDS

(TALENTS OR MINAS)

"A nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and then return. Calling ten of his servants, he gave them ten minas, and said to them, 'Engage in business until I come.' But his citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We do not want this man to reign over us.'

When he returned, having received the kingdom, he ordered these servants to whom he had given the money to be called to him, that he might know what they had gained by doing business. The first came before him, saying, 'Lord, your mina has made ten minas more.' And he said to him, 'Well done, good servant! Because you have been faithful in a very little, you shall have authority over ten cities.' And the second came, saying, 'Lord, your mina has made five minas.' And he said to him, 'And you are to be over five cities.'

Then another came, saying, 'Lord, here is your mina, which I kept laid away in a handkerchief; for I was afraid of you, because you are a severe man. You take what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow.' He said to him, 'I will condemn you with your own words, you wicked servant! You knew that I was a severe man, taking what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow? Why then did you not put my money in the bank, and at my coming I might have collected it with interest?' And he said to those who stood by, 'Take the mina from him, and give it to the one who has the ten minas.' And they said to him, 'Lord, he has ten minas!' 'I tell you that to everyone who has, more will be given, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. But as for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slaughter them before me.'" (Luke 19:12-27 and also Matthew 25:14-30)

The parable of the "talents," "minas," or "pounds" as it is variously known is often presumed to have a simple and obvious message, but it is actually one of the most difficult of Jesus' parables to interpret and may be much more complex than is often realized.

There are some differences between the versions of the parable in Matthew and Luke. In Matthew's version, it is a rich man who goes on a journey, leaving eight talents (each being a weight in silver of some 67 lbs.) with three servants (in the amounts of five, two and one talents). In Luke it is a nobleman who travels to "*receive … a kingdom*" and who leaves equal amounts of property (measured in minas which were each about 1.25 lbs. of silver) with his servants. These two versions may simply reflect the parable being given at two different times by Jesus, and they do not greatly affect our understanding of the parable's message. Here we will look at Luke's version, as it has details which may better help us to understand its meaning.

Traditionally the parable is interpreted as one in which the nobleman who goes away and returns represents Jesus. In this view his followers are encouraged to work hard with the "talents" (in the modern sense of talents; gifts or abilities) that they were given, in order to serve God and to further the establishment of his kingdom.

However, biblical scholar Joachim Jeremias thought that the parable was given against the scribes who withheld the word of God from their fellow men. In this view, Jesus reprimands the scribes and warns them that they will be punished for withholding that which was entrusted to them. While this might seem feasible in some ways, the parable does not mention scribes or other religious leaders and so this explanation seems somewhat contrived.

More importantly, this interpretation neglects a key aspect of this parable – its historical context. During much of the lifetime of Jesus, Judea was ruled under the Romans by Herod Archelaus (23 BC – c. AD 18), the son of Herod the Great in whose reign Jesus was born. After the death of Herod the Great, Archelaus was to rule over Judea, but there was great popular unrest and he ended up killing thousands of his countrymen in the initial period of cementing his power. Due to this unrest and his many enemies,

Archelaus felt he should travel to Rome to have his kingdom confirmed by the Emperor. He did this, and then, according to Josephus, he returned to Jerusalem where he mercilessly persecuted those who had not supported him while he was gone.

Set against this background – which every Jew of Jesus' day knew well – the Parable of the Pounds takes on new possible meaning. The details of Archelaus' trip to Rome to "*receive …a kingdom*" clearly may provide the backstory for the parable. But if we accept this correlation, the parable must be viewed very differently. The nobleman turned king of the story is said to be a ruthless man who demands interest on his money and revenge on those who do not want him to reign over them (Luke 19:23, 27). The brutal Archelaus might well fit this description, but it was hardly a parallel for Christ to use of his own going away and return, as in the traditional interpretation discussed above.

Importantly, the Hebrew Bible explicitly prohibited taking interest from fellow Israelites (Exodus 22:25), so the interest that the ruler of the parable demanded was something the Jews knew was prohibited. We also see the rich being warned against this kind of selfishness in Jesus' own teaching (Luke 16:13, etc.), so the details of the parable hardly fit the person of Jesus either.

How then do these facts affect our understanding of the Parable of the Pounds? If the parable was in fact modeled on the life of the hated Archelaus, rather than being an exhortation to "use our talents," the story may be seen as a condemnation of the world's way of ruling. A final clue here is found in the context of the parable. Immediately after he gave the parable, we see that *"… when he had said these things, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem"* (Luke 19:28) for his final Passover and death.

After reminding his Jewish hearers how the powerful of the ancient world ruled over people in arrogance and brutality, Jesus proceeded to enter Jerusalem as the returning righteous ruler he was. But he returned humbly, and rather than slaughtering his enemies he proceeded to die for them. Seen in this manner, the Parable of the Pounds provides a profound contrast between the ways of this world and the Way that Jesus taught and lived.

29. PARABLE OF THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT

(UNGRATEFUL SERVANT, UNMERCIFUL SERVANT)

"... the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." (Matthew 18:23-35)

Jesus gave this parable in answer to a question the disciple Peter had asked: "*Lord, how many times will my brother sin against me and I forgive him? As many as seven times?*" Jesus answered, "*Not seven times, but seventy-seven times*" (Matthew 18:21-22). He then

proceeded to give this parable in which he stressed the need to forgive others as we are forgiven by God.

The parable is straightforward, but an understanding of the relative values of the monetary amounts involved can help us better appreciate its message. A talent of silver was worth approximately 6,000 *denarii* – and each *denarius* was roughly equivalent to a day's wage for a laborer. So the first debtor in the parable who owed 10,000 talents owed a huge amount of money – the equivalent to a workman's wages for over 164,384 years! According to the ancient historian Josephus, the combined annual tribute paid by Judea and other surrounding areas at about this time was only 600 talents. But the amount is not an impossible one, as the "servant" of the king could have been a treasurer or the governor of a whole country – and the loan may not have been a personal one, but money for which the servant was responsible.

By contrast, the man who owed money to the king's servant owed only 100 *denarii* – a little more than three months wages. So in giving this parable, Jesus extended the thought that we should not stop forgiving our neighbor (symbolized by the "*seventy-seven*" times) to stress that what we ourselves have been forgiven may be almost unimaginably greater than what others have done to us, and our own debt is certainly impossible for us to pay off. He then closed the parable with the reminder that forgiveness means letting go of our desire to get even – that forgiveness must be genuinely from the heart.

The parable should not be confused with the similar-sounding Parable of the Two Debtors, which is different in examining not the need for forgiveness, but our response to it.

30. PARABLE OF THE SHREWD MANAGER

(THE UNJUST STEWARD)

"There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. And he called him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.' And the manager said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.' So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' He said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings. One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money." (Luke 16:1-13)

The Parable of the Shrewd Manager is one of the most difficult of all Jesus' parables to interpret, yet hopefully we can come to an understanding of its message.

In a nutshell, this puzzling parable tells us that a rich man's financial manager or "steward," who is about to be fired for wasting his employer's possessions, gains favor with the rich man's debtors by allowing them to write off portions of what they owe. The manager does this so that if he loses his job, he will at least be befriended by those whose debts he dishonestly reduced. The difficulty arises in trying to decide if Jesus gave this parable as an example of principles to be followed or to be shunned!

Those who feel the parable gives us an example to follow stress the fact that Jesus said, *"The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness"* (vs. 8) and also exhorted his followers *"... I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings"* (vs. 9). From this perspective, the parable seems to show us that it is possible to use money in order to make friends who will help us in times of need.

Yet this approach seems to run contrary to trusting God for our needs (Philippians 4:19), and the expression *"so that when [wealth] fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings"* is difficult to understand in this or any other context. Some have said that perhaps the steward was simply cancelling the interest on the loans – which was not supposed to be charged according to the Mosaic law (Deuteronomy 23:19) – but the parable does not say this.

On the other hand, those who feel the example given in the parable is a bad one point out that Jesus condemns the shrewd manager in calling him *"...the dishonest manager*" (Luke 16:8), reminds his listeners that those who have not been faithful in dealing with unrighteous wealth will not be entrusted with true riches (vss. 11-12), and closes the discussion with the statement *"You cannot serve God and money"* (vs. 13). However, the problem in taking this view of the parable is that it does not explain the praise given to the dishonest manager by his master, nor does it

explain Jesus' statement: *"I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth"* (vs. 9).

Yet others feel that a compromise or combination view of the parable makes the most sense. They argue that we can see and accept the point that the unjust steward was at least wise in his use of money. As the parable says: *"For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light"* (vs. 8). This view accepts the judgment that the steward was clearly dishonest, but sees that he was shrewd in extricating himself from his problem – to the point that even his master praised him for this, if not for losing his money. The thrust of the parable would then be that we should be as diligent and wise in spiritual things as those of the world are in physical things.

Viewed in this way, the words of Jesus given directly after the parable itself (vss. 9-13) provide their own correction for the excesses and dishonesty of the manager and stress only the aspect of the right use of wisdom and shrewdness in dealing with physical possessions. This view concludes that the Parable of the Unjust Steward urges us to learn wisdom from even the unjust of the world, but not to live their way of life.

But there is another aspect of this parable that we should not overlook. The parable is usually discussed – as we have done above – looking only at Luke 16:1-13, but it seems very possible that the immediately following verses should also be considered:

> *The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. And he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God."* (Luke 16:14-15)

We find so often that Jesus tailored parables – or even directly addressed them – to individuals who were present as he spoke them (see the Parable of the Humbled Guests, and many others). It is known that the Pharisees were sometimes involved in

interpretations and applications of the law that were advantageous to themselves and, as Luke says, "*were lovers of money*."

If Jesus gave the Parable of the Unjust Steward with this in mind, there may well be a connection between the story and the Pharisaic listeners. His statement to them that, *"You are those who justify yourselves before men"* sounds very much like those parable endings where Jesus explained the story and tied it to those to whom it applied. In this case, the shrewd manager certainly attempted to justify himself and gain favor with the debtors, and he did this in a surreptitious and dishonest manner, just as Christ told the Pharisees *"… but God knows your hearts*."

This understanding would explain the otherwise incomprehensible admiration of the rich man for the manager's actions as something admirable to one who was himself involved in making money from others. Yet Jesus roundly condemns this financial practice: "*For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God."*

If such a connection between devious money-making and the Pharisees was, in fact, the basis of this particular parable, everything falls into place. The unjust manager is certainly not praised – except by the equally scheming rich man – and Jesus' condemnation of the steward's behavior also applies to the behavior of the Pharisees.

31. PARABLE OF THE TWO DEBTORS

One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher."

"A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." (Luke 7:36-50)

This short parable of only two verses (vss. 41-42) cannot be understood outside of its larger context, and so the framing material has been included here along with the parable itself. The additional material given by Luke explains the parable clearly, and we can focus on several small points to appreciate the story more fully. Three short sentences within the passage convey the high points of its teaching and are worth reflection.

"*Do you see this woman?*" (vs. 44): Unlike some of the other parables, this one was not aimed at the Pharisees in general for their spiritual self-satisfaction or legalism, but at the individual Pharisee Simon for a lack of understanding of the nature and ways of God. In saying *"Do you see this woman?"* Jesus did not ask Simon if he had noticed her – the Pharisee and the other guests were painfully aware of her presence and actions. Rather, he asked if Simon was really seeing her as he should, as Christ did – as a person and not as a generic "sinner."

"She loved much" (vs. 47). Jesus pointed out to Simon the difference between the woman's action and his lack of action in the context of love. Simon was doubtless a good Pharisee, and Jesus did not fault him for his religious behavior – and we must remember that Simon had invited Jesus and his disciples to dinner – yet Christ showed the man that all his religious behavior and even his hospitality mattered little when judged on the scale of love.

"*Your faith has saved you*" (vs. 50). This statement, at the close of the account of the parable, although addressed to the repentant woman, forcibly reminded Simon that our religious deeds are not what bring us forgiveness. Even though her actions showed her love and appreciation, it was not the woman's humility, her tears, kisses, or even the gift of expensive ointment that gained her forgiveness, but her faith. "Your faith has saved you" was a statement Jesus frequently made to those he healed, though in this case it was not faith in healing, but faith in forgiveness that was honored. Jesus' words indicate that faith and forgiveness were two qualities that Simon, for all his religion, had not yet come to see.

32. PARABLE OF THE DISCOVERED TREASURES

(THE HIDDEN TREASURE AND PEARL OF GREAT VALUE)

> *"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it." (Matthew 13:44-46)*

The two complementary halves of this parable resemble the structure – though not the meaning – of the Parable of the Lights (the City on a Hill and the Lamp on a Stand) and several other parables containing pairs of short similes which make the same point.

In the Parable of the Discovered Treasures, Christ first likens the kingdom of God to a treasure that had been hidden in a field. In an age without banks and security boxes, a hole in the ground was invariably the safest place to hide anything of great value, as may be seen by the countless buried hordes of ancient coins and other treasures unearthed over the centuries. We are not told, but in this case perhaps the man was a workman ploughing the field in which he accidentally found the treasure. Similarly, the knowledge of the kingdom may first come to us unexpectedly and without warning.

In the case of the merchant, we are told he was actively searching for fine pearls. Perhaps he was what we today would call a "seeker" – one who looks for truth but is unsure where to find it. Because of large scale pearl farming and the production of cultured pearls in the modern world, pearls are not as valuable as they were in ancient times. In Jesus' time pearls had more the value that diamonds have for us today, and a perfect pearl was truly a rare and great find. The analogy of the pearl is a good one – it has often been pointed out that while diamonds and other precious stones must be

cut and polished to give them their beauty and value, the pearl is a perfect, already valuable, creation from the start.

Both of these small parables (or parts of the same parable) teach not only the great value of the kingdom of God, but also the work which we must do on our part to enter it. The core part of each parable occurs in the places of commerce where both the treasure finder and the merchant go and sell all they had – a clear reference to being willing to give up anything and everything we might need to give up in order to claim the thing of great value. We should not read over this aspect of the parable lightly. In both cases the individuals willingly stake everything they have on the value of that which they have found.

A different interpretation is sometimes given for these parables – that the treasure finder and the merchant both represent Christ himself, and the treasure and the pearl represent the Church. In this interpretation Christ gives up everything he has – referencing both his becoming human and dying – in order to "purchase" humanity. Although this interpretation gives a somewhat similar meaning to that of the Parable of the Lost Sheep, it does not seem to fit the stories of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Value as well as the more commonly understood meaning.

The traditional meaning of the Parable of the Discovered Treasures has been held by Christians from the time of the early church, and it is interesting that the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas (dated somewhere in the first or early second century AD) includes this parable with the conclusion: "*So also with you, seek his treasure that is unfailing, that is enduring, where no moth comes to eat and no worm destroys.*"

PART FIVE:

BANQUET ROOM AND JUDGMENT HALL

33. PARABLE OF THE WISE AND FOOLISH VIRGINS

(TEN VIRGINS)

"... the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise answered, saying, 'Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.' And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he answered, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.' Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." (Matthew 25: 1-13)

The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins has a clear eschatological theme: the return of the bridegroom – Christ – and our being prepared for that event. The five virgins who are ready for the bridegroom's arrival are ushered into the wedding – the kingdom – while the five who are not prepared are disowned.

Given its basic meaning we might have expected the story to say the wise virgins stayed awake while the foolish ones slept, but both groups slept while waiting for the bridegroom. This might suggest that a certain lack of expectancy would be inevitable in daily life as time progressed, but the difference between the virgins is that some had enough oil and others did not. The oil itself is often interpreted as the Spirit of God (of which oil is a symbol: Luke 4:18, etc.), but

both groups are called virgins and the difference between them is one of wisdom versus foolishness rather than having the Spirit or not. In fact, the parable tells us that when the bridegroom was about to arrive, the foolish virgins said "*our lamps are going out*," so they must have had some oil, just not any great quantity.

The story tells us that the wise virgins would not share the oil they had, but if the oil represents the Spirit of God it is not ours to share, of course, and there is no way we can give it to others. The foolish virgins had to go and try to obtain more themselves, but it was already too late for them in terms of the wedding feast. When they finally returned with oil they were not allowed into the celebration as "latecomers," and the bridegroom flatly states, "*I do not know you*."

Most of Jesus' parables do not tell us the numbers of individuals where more than one is involved – they just specify "servants" or some other group – so the specific numbering of five wise and five foolish virgins in this parable may possibly echo the words of Christ regarding "*one will be taken and one left*" (Matthew 24:40-41).

A final point to consider is that the Greek word used for "lamp" in this parable is *lampas* – not *luchnos*, the word usually used for small hand-held oil lamps in other parables and in most places in the New Testament. The *lampas* was a larger "torch," often carried outdoors and sometimes attached to a pole to illuminate a large area. (Those who went out to arrest Jesus carried these larger lights – John 18:3). This is lighting beyond that of a small lamp to light one's own way; it is also light to illuminate the way of others, and that fact may well be significant in fully understanding the lessons of this parable.

Considering the story as a whole, it would seem that this parable does not only teach a "staying awake" expectancy for the return of Christ, but also being sure to have the Spirit of God in great measure at that time – to the degree that we are found acceptable to enter the kingdom of God. The foolish virgins are not "cast into the darkness" as we see with the subjects of some other banquet parables such as the Unsuitably Clothed Wedding Guest, but neither are they given the reward which they had anticipated.

34. PARABLE OF THE HUMBLED GUESTS

One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees ... he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this person,' and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 14:1, 7-11)

It may seem natural to want to feel important, but at the dinner party described in this parable Jesus showed that there are more important things than importance!

Luke tells us how Jesus used the dinner at which a number of Pharisees were gathered as a teaching opportunity. The parable is simple enough, as is its basic lesson – that *"everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted"* in such a circumstance. It's a principle the Pharisees should have known. Doubtless every one of them had read the biblical proverb that says:

"Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great, for it is better to be told, 'Come up here,' than to be put lower in the presence of a noble..." (Proverbs 25:6-7)

Of course, we know that it is possible for any of us to understand the right way and not to always follow it, yet Christ's words indicate that the desire to appear important was a way of life for many of the Pharisees: "*Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and respectful greetings in the marketplaces*" (Luke 11:43 NIV).

But if we only read this parable at this basic level, we risk seeing it as little more than practical social advice – a kind of "how to get ahead by being humble" story. It is more likely that the parable was intended to be applied at a broader spiritual level. Jesus frequently attacked the Pharisees' notion of religion and righteousness; and it seems very possible that in this case he chastised these religious individuals not just for seeking the best seats at the dinner, but for an underlying attitude of self-elevation.

Jesus had dealt with the same desire for importance among his own disciples when James and John asked to be seated at his right and left hand – the ultimate seats of honor – when he came in his kingdom. At that time Jesus told his disciples what the Pharisees and other self-elevating dinner guests needed to know:

> *"… whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve…*" (Mark 10:43-45)

In their game of "musical chairs," the Pharisees were not only seeking to be close to important individuals, but also avoiding the unimportant. Ultimately, that group included the poor, the widows, the sick, and especially the sinners with whom Jesus mixed (Luke 15:2). But the willingness to associate with any and to serve all lay at the heart of Jesus' teaching and was reflected by the ex–Pharisee Paul when he wrote: *"Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly"* (Romans 12:16). Jesus not only faulted the Pharisees for desiring to sit with those who were important; his parable also condemned them just as much for their lack of desire to sit with those who were not.

35. PARABLE OF THE DINNER GUESTS

> *He said also to the man who had invited him, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just." (Luke 14:12-14)*

This is not really a true parable, but it is often called one as it appears between two parables having to do with banquets and feasts. While true parables tell a story in which someone is described as doing an action symbolizing something done by someone else, this short passage consists of a direct statement by Jesus to the person concerned – the host of the banquet. Nevertheless, the passage fits into the context of the parables that frame it while giving its own message, so it is included here for the sake of completeness.

At the practical level, this passage tells us a number of things regarding Jesus' attitude toward those with whom he interacted. It has often been said that as far as we can tell from the Gospel accounts Jesus never turned down an invitation to dinner, and he himself said that he chose to eat with whoever invited him regardless of their real or perceived level of righteousness (Matthew 9:10). This simple practice shows us Christ's complete and open acceptance of every person – whether storied sinner or righteous religionist. But in this passage he turns the principle of acceptance around by showing his host that we should accept everyone in terms of those we invite as well as those whose invitations we accept.

It is interesting to wonder why Jesus instructed his host in this manner. Directly before making this statement to the banquet host, Jesus had pointed out the desire of the guests to elevate themselves by choosing the best seats (the Parable of the Humbled Guests). Was the host also guilty of the desire to elevate himself in that he preferred to surround himself with successful or wealthy people like

himself or was there perhaps some other reason in the man's mind? Jesus specifically told him to invite the poor *"because they cannot repay you"* (Luke 14:14), and we might wonder if the host was expecting favors from his friends for the opportunity to have dinner with the Teacher and reported miracle worker from Galilee about whom everyone was talking! In any event, however Christ's words applied to his host, we can apply his words to ourselves in many ways.

Do we ever give expecting something in return? Is our behavior with friends and family members free from such a flaw? Do we ever hope to be seen in our giving? We should remember that this banquet took place in the house of one of the leaders of the Pharisees, and Jesus knew full well the proclivity of some of these individuals to do good in order to be *"to be seen by others"* (Matthew 23:5). Even when we give secretly we may expect a return. In our own society it has sometimes been said that those who will not ever give without receiving a tax receipt are not giving at all, and whether that is true or not, many such issues – ancient and modern – are covered by the words of Jesus to the host of this particular banquet.

36. PARABLE OF THE GREAT BANQUET INVITATIONS

When one of those who reclined at table with him heard these things, he said to him, "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" But he said to him, "A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. And at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused.' And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.' And another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.' So the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, 'Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.' And the servant said, 'Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.' And the master said to the servant, 'Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.'" (Luke 14:15-24)

The Parable of the Great Banquet Invitations is one of the teachings of Jesus given at an actual banquet. In the Gospel of Luke it follows directly after Jesus' instruction to the host: "*When you give a dinner or a banquet … invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you…*" (Luke 14:12-14).

In this parable Jesus then turned to a broader picture regarding those who had an invitation to attend a great banquet but who declined the opportunity, and others who gladly accepted in their place. To fully grasp what is said in this parable we should understand that in Jesus' time it was customary to send out two

separate invitations when a banquet or other celebration was planned. The first invitation was to announce the event and give advance warning that it would occur – somewhat like a modern "save the date" announcement. In a culture where preparations had to be made to leave farms and vineyards with suitable care and to travel to wherever the feast was to be held, this kind of advance warning was necessary. When the time arrived and the banquet was prepared and ready for the guests, a second message was sent out to come immediately to the celebration.

Understanding this fact puts the responses of the invited guests in better perspective. While their various excuses might all sound reasonable to us, they are less so when we realize this was the second invitation that was sent out to announce "*Come, for everything is now ready*" (vs. 17). Clearly the invited guests had had opportunity to prepare but had not done so, and their excuses make it sound as though they did not have any particular desire to attend. This explains the host's anger and his insistence that his servants quickly bring others into the banquet.

The Parable of the Great Banquet Invitations symbolizes the fact that ancient Israel had been given advance invitation to the kingdom of God through the messages of all the prophets. The nation had largely ignored the invitation, and God now sent the final invitation – through the teaching of Jesus. When that was declined, God began to bring in others instead – the poor and afflicted, the sinners and social outcasts, and eventually the Gentiles. The parable also has an individual application, of course – if we have received an invitation, it asks us how we personally have responded.

37. PARABLE OF THE UNSUITABLY CLOTHED WEDDING GUEST

> *"Then [the king] said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready ... invite to the banquet anyone you find.' So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests. "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. He asked, 'How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?' The man was speechless. Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are invited, but few are chosen." (Matthew 22:8-14 NIV)*

Discussion of this parable often focuses on what it means that the unsuitably clothed guest is cast *"into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*" or on the summary statement that *"many are invited, but few are chosen*." But a part of the parable that is often overlooked is, in a way, central to what Jesus was teaching in this story: the guest who was expelled was not cast out because he was not recognized or not invited, but because his clothes were somehow not acceptable.

The parable states that the individual cast out of the banquet was not wearing "*wedding clothes*," and it is not difficult to learn what this means. Historically, we know that in ancient Judea, as in many other ancient and modern cultures, guests wore their finest clothes to a wedding. This fact operated at various levels. It showed the guests' respect for the host and it also honored the host by showing that his friends were well-dressed and important – and thus belonged at the banquet of a great person or even a king.

Throughout Judea and many areas of the ancient Near East, the host (especially a king) might also present expensive garments as gifts to those attending a wedding or other festival so that they

would be suitably attired (see Genesis 45:22; Judges 14:12; 2 Kings 5:22; 10:22). This seems likely to have been the case in this parable, as the guests were all gathered unexpectedly from the streets with no warning to prepare themselves and to wear fine clothes; yet it is only the one individual whose clothing is questioned.

So, Christ's first-century hearers would doubtless understand that the problematic guest would not be accepted at the wedding banquet in his everyday or non-wedding clothes. But what did Christ mean by this aspect of the story? Although, like many parables, the story does not state the point it sought to make directly, it seems clear that the guests' "clothes" represent their spiritual condition. The problematic guest apparently considered his own clothes amply good enough, for he has nothing to say when challenged, but the king judges by his own much higher standard and renounces the guest for not having suitable wedding attire.

Christ's words were doubtless aimed at those who, like the Pharisees, trusted in their own righteousness. Jesus tells his hearers in this parable that our own "garments" – our own righteousness – is simply not good enough; and we will only attend the banquet of his coming if we are suitably dressed not in our own, but in his righteousness. Interestingly, the parable reflects a passage in Isaiah which specifically speaks of festival garments in precisely this way:

> *I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.* (Isaiah 61:10 NIV)

To this remarkable picture we can add the warning of the prophet Zephaniah who speaks of guests not properly attired:

> *for the day of the Lord is near. The Lord has prepared a sacrifice; he has consecrated those he has invited. On the day*

of the Lord's sacrifice I will punish … all those clad in foreign clothes. (Zephaniah 1:7-8 NIV)

The "foreign" clothes Zephaniah speaks of were those other than what God had commanded the Israelites to wear (Numbers 15:37; Deuteronomy 22:12; etc.). Such inappropriately dressed guests are doubtless the individuals mentioned in the book of Revelation who are said to be "*naked*" and counseled to buy garments (Revelation 3:4, 18) in order to join those who wear white robes at the wedding of the Lamb:

"For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear. (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God's holy people.)" (Revelation 19:7-8 NIV*)*

Here the fine clothing of the wedding guests is explicitly linked with righteousness – and this clothing is "*given to [God's people] to wear*." So Christ's parable should remind us that while we are called to obedience, our own human righteousness will never be perfect enough. We are expected to wear far better spiritual "clothes" than we could produce ourselves. That is why we are commanded to *"…clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ…*" (Romans 13:14 NIV), for it is God himself who "*… is our righteousness*" (Jeremiah 33:16 and see also Romans 4:24). Or, as the apostle Paul put it, we should:

"… be found in him, not having a righteousness of [our] own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith." (Philippians 3:9 NIV)

Of course, this does not mean that we are exempt from making every effort to live righteously (James 1:22-27; etc.), but that our "best clothes" are the ones God gives us.

38. PARABLE OF THE UNJUST JUDGE AND PERSISTENT WIDOW

> *"In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'" And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:2-8)*

The judge in this parable seems to pride himself on fearing neither God nor man, but his attitude is not one of judicial impartiality; rather it is simply one of selfishness. He does not wish to be wearied by the widow's persistent pleas, so he eventually grants her request. The preface to the parable (Luke 18:1) clearly shows that it teaches the necessity of patient, persistent prayer – so it is similar to the story of the Friend in Need (Luke 11:5-13), and a discussion of prayer precedes both of these parables.

But although both parables aim toward the same lesson, they do so through different situations and make slightly different points. Unlike the story of the Friend in Need, this parable does not compare going to God with approaching someone who is, indeed, a friend, but rather a judge who is a godless and selfish man. This parable, then, emphasizes the great difference between the unjust judge and the righteous God, while still making the point of persistence in prayer.

Beneath the overall meaning, however, the details of this parable provide interesting food for thought. Notice, for example, that the widow speaks only six words in presenting her plea. It is because of

her persistence in asking, not her many words, that she is finally heard.

It is also important to realize that although she says "*avenge me*" (Luke 18:3 KJV), the woman does not ask for revenge against her adversary. The word *ekdikeó*, translated "avenge" in the King James Version, is also found in Romans 12:19 where we are specifically told "*Do not take revenge*;" but the word is used in contexts of both punishment and protection. Thus, the New American Standard Bible translates the woman's words in Luke 18:3 as *"Give me legal protection from my opponent."*

While the Parable of the Friend in Need uses the example of an individual approaching a close friend for help, this one uses instead the example of a probably poor and powerless woman (in that culture, someone with three reasons to have little influence) approaching a cold-hearted individual with whom she has no influence whatsoever.

We can look at the result of the woman's pleas in two ways: that even a cold-hearted and selfish individual will eventually relent and reward persistence (so how much more will God do so), or that God is in fact behind the scenes and will work things out even in such circumstances. As Jesus said in closing the parable, *"will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night?"* (vs. 7).

But these are not Jesus' final words regarding this parable. Interestingly, he concludes: "*Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?*" (Luke 18:8). This short summation presents us with the fascinating conclusion that despite the fact that we can "prove" that God's help is present in our lives through persistent prayer, fewer and fewer will do this as the age progresses, and it will be questionable to what degree Christ would find active faith based on believing prayer at his return. That is an additional lesson we can take from the Parable of the Unjust Judge and Persistent Widow, and perhaps, for many, it is a vitally important one.

39. PARABLE OF LAZARUS AND THE RICH MAN

(LAZARUS AND DIVES)

"There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house – for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'" (Luke 16:19-31)

Although the rich man is not named in this story ("dives" is simply a word meaning "rich man"), the beggar is specifically called Lazarus and some have claimed that Jesus must have been speaking here of an actual event because parables do not use personal names.

But such a minor variation from this literary form does not mean the story cannot be a parable – especially as all its other aspects fit the parable form and Jesus may have had a specific reason for inserting the name Lazarus, as we shall see.

The parable first contrasts the rich man and Lazarus in life (vss. 19-21), then goes on to contrast their situations after death (vss. 22-31). It is easy to read the story and presume, as many do, that it speaks of Lazarus as being in heaven and the rich man in hell, but this is probably not what is intended. The parable does not tell us that Lazarus was in heaven or in the presence of God, but in "*Abraham's bosom*" (KJV, NKJV, etc.). For the Jews of ancient Judea "Abraham's bosom" referred to a condition in *sheol* (the grave or the underworld) where they believed the soul or spirit of the righteous dead waited until judgment day when they would be raised to life again.

In the New Testament, the apostle Peter speaks of Abraham and the other patriarchs and godly men of the past as being dead in their tombs (Acts 2:29, 34), and this was the understanding of the apostle Paul who described death as a sleep until the day of the Lord when the righteous would rise to eternal life (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42). It was also believed that the souls or spirits of the unrighteous likewise waited in death for a resurrection, but in their case to punishment (Matthew 13:40-42).

This background helps us to understand both the details of the parable and to see that it is told as an allegory. References to things like body parts – such as cooling the "tongue" of the rich man – are therefore figures of speech and have been widely understood this way. Martin Luther, for example, wrote:

> The hell here mentioned cannot be the true hell that will begin on the day of judgment. For the corpse of the rich man is without doubt not in hell, but buried in the earth; it must however be a place where the soul can be and has no peace, and it cannot be corporeal.

Luther thought that the "hell" of the rich man must therefore have been his "conscience," but the parable form does not require every aspect of its story to have a specific meaning, and we can understand the parable as relating simply to the "situation" of the rich man and Lazarus once they died.

How does all this relate to the Pharisees to whom Jesus told this parable (Luke 16:14-15)? The Pharisees believed that the main thing needed for eternal life was to be a physical descendant of Abraham (Luke 3:8). The Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man must have stung them because Christ pointedly affirms that just being an heir of Abraham did not guarantee the rich man anything, and that it was the beggar Lazarus – a member of a class despised by many Pharisees as unworthy individuals doubtless being punished for their sins – who was in fact admitted to the "*bosom of Abraham*."

And it is perhaps here that we find the reason for the inclusion of the personal name Lazarus in this parable. Lazarus (from the Hebrew Eleazar – "God is my help") was, of course, the name of the individual from Bethany who was resurrected by Jesus four days after his death (John 11). We have no proof that the Lazarus of the parable was named after the Lazarus raised from the dead in Chapter 11 of John's Gospel, but Lazarus is mentioned again in John Chapter 12. Shortly before the Passover on which Jesus was crucified, Jesus returned to Bethany where the once-dead Lazarus was attracting great attention – so much so that John tells us the religious leaders plotted to kill Lazarus because so many people were believing in Jesus because of this miracle. Given the wide acclaim that the people were making of the resurrection of that man, Jesus' reference to a "Lazarus" in his parable would hardly have been lost on the Pharisees.

As a result, many commentators have seen the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man as being at least partly a reprimand given by Christ to the Pharisees for their lack of belief (although they professed to believe in the resurrection of the dead) in the resurrection of Lazarus of Bethany. We should remember that in the parable Jesus specifically mentioned Abraham (to whom the

Pharisees looked for their eligibility for salvation – John 8:39), saying that if the relatives of the rich man did not believe God's word, then they would not believe Lazarus if he were resurrected to them (Luke 12:31).

Some scholars have also seen the parable as a reprimand to the priestly Sadducees who did not believe in the resurrection, because the rich man is said to wear "purple and fine linen" which was priestly dress. The reference to the rich man's "five brothers" could then possibly be seen as an allusion to the five sons of Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who all served as high priests at that time according to the Jewish historian Josephus – though these similarities may be purely coincidental.

Whether there are references to actual historical individuals in this parable or not, behind the various details of this complex and fascinating story we should not forget the moral message that is also conveyed. We should notice that the rich man must have been aware of the needs of Lazarus because the beggar lay at his gate – the rich man must have passed him every time he left or entered his home.

At this level, the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man reminds us all that if we are not in the economic condition of Lazarus in life then we are probably, at least to some degree, in the condition of the rich man. Like the rich man in the parable, the Pharisees and many other religious individuals of that day ignored the needs of the poor. It is to the extent that we do not do this (James 1:27; 2:15-17) that our religion will mean more than that of the Pharisees.

40. PARABLE OF THE SHEEP AND GOATS

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal

punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (Matthew 25:31-46)

This is the last of a connected series of parables that Christ gave his disciples before the events leading to his crucifixion. The discourse is sometimes said to not be a true parable because it does not relate a story of events happening to other characters that we can relate to ourselves or others. However, although it may be unique in this regard, the "*sheep*" and "*goats*" in this passage can be viewed as the other characters of this story, which we must then compare with ourselves or others.

The parable may be based on the words of Ezekiel: "*As for you, my flock, this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will judge between one sheep and another, and between rams and goats*" (Ezekiel 34:17 NIV), but the parable is expanded to make its message perfectly clear. The only thing not obvious about what is said – but a crucial aspect of the parable – is the identity of the individuals symbolized by the "*goats*."

The usual interpretation of the parable has seen the separation of the sheep and the goats as representing the separation of the righteous and the unrighteous, but an increasing number of commentators have come to wonder if the separation is actually between what we might call "true Christians" and those who are Christians in name only or who do not attempt to follow Christ in their behavior.

There are several reasons for this possible understanding. The parable seems to place both the "*sheep*" and the "*goats*" in the same flock (the Church?) and talks of separating them, rather than them being righteous and unrighteous who are already clearly separated. Also, the "*goats*" seem surprised that they are not being judged as being righteous, which we would not expect of those who were openly evil. Finally, Jesus tells each group that whatever they did or did not do was done or not done to his "*brothers*," a term Jesus uses only of the disciples or believers elsewhere in the Gospels (Matthew 12:48-49).

In this view, then, the true disciples of Christ were expected to help supply the needs of the hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, and

those in prison with the common factor being the need of those in all these groups. This is especially understandable when we realize, for example, that the purpose of prisons in the first century was not primarily to act as places where people were held for long periods as punishment for their crimes, but places of holding until accused individuals could be tried (see for example, Acts 12:4, and in the case of Paul, held till he could be tried before Caesar). During that time it was the responsibility of family members, friends or others to provide for the necessities of those held in prison – the "State" did not provide for them. So visiting those in prison meant helping those who in that system had no way to provide for their own needs, and this was especially true of followers of Christ who might be disowned by their families and friends.

If this view of the parable is correct, Jesus spoke not about the separation of the good and the evil as "*sheep*" and "*goats*," but the separation of those truly following him and those who claimed to do so, but whose lives did not bear the fruit of works of love. The punishment meted out to the "goats" of the parable might seem extreme if they are viewed as simply "failed Christians," but we can only presume that the implied failing involved a deep enough bankruptcy of spirit to warrant the punishment.

This understanding of the parable places it alongside others having a similar message. In the Parable of the Sheep and Goats, the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins and that of the Wise and Foolish Servants (which all appear to have been given at the same time) as well as in the Parable of the Pounds, the Parable of the Unsuitably Clothed Wedding Guest, and others, all the characters are servants or friends (or part of the flock) of their master. There is no room in these parables for any concept of contrast between believers and unbelievers. These parables rather present a contrast between faithful and unfaithful, wise and unwise, just and unjust servants of God. Their message is made all the more powerful when we understand that fact.

Nevertheless, however we view the subjects of this parable, its lesson of Christian concern for those in need remains – and was clearly at the core of Christ's teaching throughout his ministry.

APPENDIX: THE PARABLES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Although the parables of Jesus were one of the most characteristic features of his teaching, they are not the first parables to be found in the Bible. Parables were an essential part of the religious instruction of ancient Israel from early times. The psalmist Asaph, for example, wrote: "*My people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth with a parable…*" (Psalms 78:1-3 NIV), and the book of Hosea tells us that God: "*… spoke to the prophets … and told parables through them*" (Hosea 12:10 NIV). If we learn to recognize it, we can actually find this form of teaching throughout many books of the Old Testament, and understanding its nature can help us better understand the parables that Jesus himself gave.

The key to recognizing true biblical parables in the Old Testament (as opposed to figurative or metaphorical statements, short riddles, or stories with an obvious moral) is that a true biblical parable has two parts. In the first part – called the *mashal* in Hebrew – a simple story is told for the sake of conveying a deeper truth. But that truth is never obvious in the story itself; it has to be revealed in the second part of the parable – called the *nimshal* – which provides the "key" to unlocking the parable's meaning. The two parts of *content* and *intent* are only brought together at the conclusion of the narrative – which is why, of course, we read in the New Testament that Jesus often taught in parables and later explained them by providing the *nimshal* or key to his disciples (Luke 8:9; Mark 4:33-34; etc.).

We see this two-part structure in one of the earliest parables of the Old Testament. The book of Judges records that the young man Jotham told the people of Shechem a detailed story of how the trees of the forest made themselves a king (Judges 9:7-15). When the parable is finished, he explains it by showing how the parts of the story fit their own political circumstances (Judges 9:16-20).

We also see the two-part structure in the famous story that the prophet Nathan tells King David about a sinful rich man who took his poor neighbor's only lamb when he had plenty of lambs himself. When David indignantly states that the evil man deserves death, Nathan provides the *nimshal* to the parable by simply saying "*You are the man!*" – because David had taken the only wife of his general, Uriah (2 Samuel 12:1-7).

In these cases, the connection between the *mashal*/content of the parables and their *nimshal*/intent is easy to grasp, but sometimes the Old Testament gives parables that would be very difficult to understand without the explaining "key" or the background we are given. Such is the case with the story of the two fighting brothers that was told to David by the wise widow from Tekoa (2 Samuel 14:1-7). In this story David's general Joab carefully constructs a parable with a meaning we would not guess unless it is explained – as it is by the wise widow (2 Samuel 14:13-14).

When we look for such stories that have to be explained in the course of the narrative in which they appear, we find many parables in the Old Testament. Parables were especially favored by the Hebrew prophets, and the book of Ezekiel, for example, contains at least nine of them. Isaiah also uses parables in his teaching, and some of these parables clearly influenced those given by Jesus. In Isaiah, Chapter 5, the prophet tells a parable of a vineyard and its bad fruit (Isaiah 5:1-6) which he then explains as being relevant to the nation of Israel (vs. 7). Although Jesus altered the details slightly in the parables found in Matthew 21:33-44 and Luke 13:6-9, the stories are recognizably similar and their message is identical.

Jesus also framed many of his parables on non-parable stories found in the Old Testament. As we saw earlier in this book, his parable of the Good Samaritan is an example of this and appears to be based on a section of 2 Chronicles which tells of the kindness given to Judean captives by men of Samaria who:

> *… clothed all who were naked among them. They clothed them, gave them sandals, provided them with food and drink, and anointed them, and carrying all the feeble among*

> *them on donkeys, they brought them to their kinsfolk at Jericho, the city of palm trees. Then they returned to Samaria.* (2 Chronicles 28:15)

In this simple narrative Jesus found the basis for one of the most profound of his parables, the lessons of which are far-reaching and apply in every age. But the greatest reliance of Christ's parables on the Old Testament is found not in their use of Old Testament story plots, but in their use of imagery applied to God. Old Testament parables show God as a king, a father, a husband, and in other key ways. Of the somewhat more than forty parables of Jesus recorded in the New Testament, at least twenty metaphorically refer to him by means of the same imagery used of God in Old Testament parables and stories. This self-portrayal with imagery used of God is a vital part of the parables of Jesus and ties directly to his teaching of his own messianic role.

So the parables of the Old Testament are important not only in their own right in the stories in which they are found, but also in forming the basis for some of Jesus' own parables, as well as providing images that Jewish hearers would associate with God when they heard them.

But although there are numerous well-crafted parables in the Old Testament, it is clear that Jesus perfected the art of parable-telling and brought to the form a subtlety and spiritual depth that had not been seen before.

AFTERWORD

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