

BURIED TREASURE:

Exploring The Parables Of Jesus



by J. W. Jepson, D.Min.

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introduction

EVERYBODY LOVES A STORY

The warm rays of the summer sun stream brightly through the windows of the little sanctuary. The clock on the back wall shows an inch past noon. The air hangs heavy over the quiet congregation. Worshipers stare glassy-eyed at the minister. Here and there the head of a pew-dozer bobs down and up.

Suddenly heads jerk up. Everybody blinks to attention. The pastor is telling a story! The entire atmosphere has changed. Soon the benediction is spoken. As the people file out, several are heard to remark, "That was a good sermon, Brother Smith."

Yes, everybody loves a story. Good sermon illustrations put the truth into real life.

When Jesus preached to the crowds, He spoke in parables. "Parable" comes from a Greek word that means "to place or throw alongside of." The parables of our Lord were sermon illustrations with the sermon hidden inside.

One day the puzzled disciples asked the Master why He spoke to the multitudes in parables. His answer is interesting:

"Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he shall have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see; and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand." (Matthew 13:11-13).

He went on to say that the prophecy of Isaiah 6:9 and 10 was even then being fulfilled in those who heard Him. Later, in verses 34 and 35, Matthew added this:

"All these things Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables; and without a parable He did not speak to them, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying: 'I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world.'"

So then, when Jesus delivered the truth to the masses, He wrapped it in parables. His reason for doing this was not to make the truth plain, but to make it *almost* plain.

When the Master taught His disciples, He took all the wrappers off the truth and showed it to them plainly. But in speaking to the multitudes, He took off all the wrappers *except the last one*. It was like bringing the lens *almost* into focus, or bringing deeply buried treasure up to within a foot or two of the surface.

But why would Jesus do that? The reason is simple. The crowd is full of curious on-lookers, people who are not serious about the truth. Hand them a golden nugget, and

they will use it for a paperweight. Dig up the treasure chest and they will not bother to open the lid. They do not value the truth; so why should God impose it upon them? Why should the Lord focus the lens sharply for eyes that do not see because the heart is not interested in looking?

So we have the parables. Leave the last wrapper on the truth. The careless will not bother to peek at it. But the sincere seeker will go for it like a youngster ripping the wrappings from his presents on Christmas morning. Put a sign over the spot: "treasure buried here—digging welcome," and stand a shovel nearby. They who have a fear of being converted will not even touch the shovel, but they who yearn to be among the blessed will grab it and the covering soil will be gone in a moment.

On a few occasions the Holy Spirit allows us to listen in while Jesus explained a parable to His disciples privately. But most of the time all we see is the treasure sign and a shovel standing invitingly beside it.

You must be one of those who desire to dig. If not, you would not be reading this. Your hand is already gripping the handle. But before we start digging, let us remind ourselves where we are digging and what we are digging for.

First, what is a parable? The old, familiar definition is probably the best. A parable is "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning." Parables take familiar, everyday facts and lay them alongside unfamiliar, spiritual facts. The two correspond in some way. As the Holy Spirit throws light on the correlation, the unfamiliar becomes clear and we grasp the truth.

Next, what does the parable mean? Here the problems start. It is easy to make a parable say more than it is intended to say by reading into it something that is not really there. People get into trouble when they base doctrine on the details of a parable. God wants us to avoid this common mistake.

When Jesus gave a parable, He intended for it to embody one main point. Find that point; then stand there and look at the entire parable from that central position. A parable is like a mountain. If we wander around the base, we can become confused. But once we climb to the peak, the whole mountain spreads out before us in all directions as one grand panorama. In most parables the details and secondary points are there to reinforce the main point and to elaborate on it. When exploring the parables, keep digging for the main point in each parable.

And dig we should! Much of our Lord's teaching comes to us in parables. The sign marks the spot where the nuggets are buried, and the nearby shovel invites us. So, grab the handle and start digging. "There's gold in them thar hills!"

1.

NEW GARMENTS AND NEW WINE

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Then they said to Him, "Why do the disciples of John fast often and make prayers, and likewise those of the Pharisees, but Yours eat and drink?"

And He said to them, "Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them; then they will fast in those days."

Then He spoke a parable to them: "No one puts a piece from a new garment on an old one; otherwise the new makes a tear, and also the piece that was taken out of the new does not match the old.

And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine will burst the wineskins and be spilled, and the wineskins will be ruined. But new wine must be put into new wineskins, and both are preserved. And no one, having drunk old wine, immediately desires new; for he says, 'The old is better.'"

-Luke 5:33-39

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In one corner of the living room sits an old, vinyl-covered recliner. When it was new, the cover was soft and pliable. But over the years the headrest has turned hard and stiff from the oil in people's hair. Before long the vinyl is going to crack, and the chair will have to be re-covered.

Religion tends to be like that, too. What starts out as a dynamic relationship with God can easily deteriorate into a rigid form.

Why? Because a living relationship with God demands active heart involvement. But as heart involvement diminishes, there is less and less reality and more and more mechanical form. When heart involvement ceases, all that is left are the familiar forms—the ways people used to act from the heart, but now act only out of habit or tradition. They cling tenaciously to the forms because that is all they have left. There are too many sentiments associated with the forms for people to discard them. Letting go of the forms would seem like abandoning the values that they once signified. That would leave them with nothing.

So they remain attached to the comforting, reassuring forms. The motions are so routine that they can be performed almost mechanically, requiring little thought or effort and no heart involvement.

Some years ago, after attending a particular church service, someone remarked to a

visitor, "These people have been worshipping off of page two for years." One wonders what would happen if someone were to slip into the church building some Saturday night and clip page two out of all the hymnals! Probably nothing. It could all be done easily from memory without missing a beat!

That happened to Israel. Look at the nation's beginnings. Miracles in Egypt. Awesome phenomena at Sinai. Heaven-sent bread in the wilderness. Providential victories in battle. The dynamics of a living faith shaped every aspect of life. But when the Messiah came on the scene many centuries later, what did He find? Only forms—mindless, meaningless, oppressive forms.

One day Matthew, a tax collector, decided to have a banquet in Jesus' honor. The Master had just invaded Matthew's meaningless, mediocre existence and had vitalized it with His summons, "Follow Me."

So what if the religious tradition that had suffocated Matthew all his life decreed that this was a "fast day." He had met the Master and now his life had a new agenda. This new life in Christ was something to celebrate!

We pick up the account in all three of the synoptic gospels (Matthew 9:14-17; Mark 2:18-22; Luke 5:33-39). We are generally following Luke's narrative.

Many other tax collectors and sinners attended the banquet that day. The tax collectors worked for the Roman government (and, of course, for themselves) and were despised by the people. Right away Jesus and His disciples were confronted by the scribes and Pharisees, who were habitually complaining about Jesus saving and healing people and making them happy.

"Why are you eating with these people?" they demanded. Jesus answered, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance" (Matthew 9:12).

Then the disciples of John the Baptist joined in the chorus of questions: "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?" (Matthew 9:14).

The Lord let them know that this was a time of celebration. He, the Bridegroom, was there! The disciples of John should have known this from what John had said to them earlier (see John 3:29).

Then the Lord gave the twin parables about putting a new patch on an old garment and putting new wine in old wineskins.

The religious system of the day had substituted the repressive and spiritually irrelevant traditions of men for the wholesome commandments of God. Righteousness was defined as obedience to external rules rather than love for God and for others. Justice, mercy and the love of God mattered not: but be sure to strain out that gnat!

Such is the sad state of affairs when morality—that is, genuine heart-love for God

and for others—is divorced from religion. Both morality and religion die. All that is left is cold legalism. Whenever people see no vital relationship between their religion and their lifestyle, religion for them has become an empty form.

Jesus would not compromise with a religious show, a mockery that had divorced itself from moral reality. Human systems have always tried to force Jesus into their mold. But the Lord refuses to play their games.

So, if we are going to get to Heaven, we cannot play games here. We must face the moral imperatives of the gospel. In other words, we must stop playing church. We must repent. We must change our heart and our ways. We must come to Jesus Christ, trust Him as our Savior and follow Him as the Lord of all of life.

Now who in their right mind would cut a hole in a brand new suit of clothes just to get a patch to sew on an old dress or pair of pants? Besides, in those days new cloth was not pre-shrunk. As the new cloth shrank, it would tear the old garment.

And who would put new wine in old wineskins? Imagine a typical house in Judea or Galilee with old smoke-hardened wineskins hanging on the wall in the kitchen area. Suppose that someone absentmindedly poured some new wine into one of the brittle old skins. As the wineskins hang near the warm fire, things start happening inside. The family goes to bed and for a while all is quiet. Then suddenly, about 3:00 am,—"*ka—pow!*"—and there is new wine everywhere! On the wall hangs the forlorn remains of the ruined old wineskin.

New wine can really cause a commotion if we try to force it into old wineskins. Old forms cannot hold a new, dynamic faith. The new wine will tear the old, rigid, man-made systems apart! Some people are so self-satisfied in their present spiritual state that they refuse to change. They are like an old gentleman who lived in Rainier, Oregon, many years ago. When urged to receive Christ into his heart, he retorted, "I have all the religion I want." Poor man. The old, empty traditions were all he desired. The new birth means change—radical change. And some people would rather die than change.

Now, God does not want to break all the old religious wineskins that are still hanging around. Some of them still have some good, orthodox "wine" left in them. It is all that some dear people have to sustain their Christian faith. If some of God's "frozen chosen" are too rigid to respond to a genuine revival, let them be. Let us not break their wineskins. On the other hand, when the issue is saving truth versus soul-subverting error, let us not attempt to patch up the old, apostate systems with pieces of truth from the new garment. Off with the old rags! On with the complete, new robe!

Put the new wine into new wineskins. Adopt modes of spiritual life and expression that are compatible with the new life in Christ and responsive to the dynamic of the Holy Spirit.

In a sense the epistle to the Hebrews can be regarded as a commentary on these two parables of our Lord. In Christ we have a better covenant, a better sacrifice, a

better sanctuary, better promises and a better hope. We have a new and living way. It is a new life, a new wine that breaks to "smithereens" the old, inflexible wineskins of formalism and legalism.

So instead of patching up the old garment, let us put on the new. Let us put the new wine only into wineskins that can handle it. Jesus said,

"But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth: for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

-John 4:23, 24

The Father is looking for people who will put on the new garment of righteousness and holiness and imbibe the new wine of the Spirit and truth. He invites you to be among the blessed. Life in the Spirit is yours as the gift of divine grace. It is yours in Christ Jesus by faith.

2.

NOTHING TO PAY

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Then one of the Pharisees asked Him to eat with him. And He went to the Pharisee's house, and sat down to eat.

And behold, a woman in the city who was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at the table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster box of fragrant oil, and stood at His feet behind him weeping; and she began to wash His feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head; and she kissed His feet and anointed them with the fragrant oil.

Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he spoke to himself, saying, "This man, if He were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner."

And Jesus answered and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." So he said, "Teacher, say it."

"There was a certain creditor who had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both. Tell Me, therefore, which of them will love him more?"

Simon answered and said, "I suppose the one whom he forgave more." And He said to him, "You have rightly judged."

Then He turned to the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has washed My feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head. You gave Me no kiss, but this woman has not ceased to kiss My feet since the time I came in. You did not anoint My head with oil, but this woman has anointed My feet with fragrant oil. Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little."

Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." And those who sat at the table with Him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"

Then He said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

-Luke 7:36-50

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Sometimes this is called the parable of the two debtors. Luke alone records it. The parable itself is very short, but the setting brings out the richness of its meaning. This makes the parable and its context inseparable. For that reason they must be considered together.

A local Pharisee had invited Jesus home for dinner. We do not know the Pharisee's motive, but it must not have been good because, according to the social code of the day, he treated his guest in a manner that bordered on insult. He withheld the common courtesies of a welcome kiss, oil to anoint the head and water to wash the feet.

As they ate, a woman who was the "town sinner" came in and stood at Jesus' feet, weeping and holding an alabaster box of ointment.

Walking in on a dinner was not unusual in that culture. Access was easy and it was common for people to come in and talk with the guests.

Suddenly a drama began to unfold, a drama with three characters: Simon the Pharisee, a woman of ill repute, and Jesus the Christ.

Repeatedly and with deep affection the woman kissed the Master's feet, wetting them with her gushing tears and wiping them with her hair. Then she took the precious ointment and anointed the feet that she had bathed from the fountain of her deep devotion.

Why did she do this? The Bible does not say. Perhaps Jesus had recently saved her from her sins. Or perhaps this was itself her moment of repentance and faith. What else would change a hard, cynical woman of the streets into a person of such deep, tender devotion? In the past she had used her hair and lips for immoral purposes. Perhaps she had not shed a tear in years. Now she offered all of these in holy adoration at the feet of the Messiah. It is one of the most tender scenes of the Bible, one that brings out the wonderful grace of our blessed Lord.

But what was Simon the Pharisee doing while the redeemed sinner worshiped her Savior? He was behaving like the cold, loveless, self-righteous hypocrite that he was. He felt smug, convinced that his suspicions about Jesus had been confirmed. Silently he was thinking, "This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is who is touching him: for she is a sinner" (verse 39).

Notice the attitude: "She is the sinner, not I. Certainly Jesus must recognize my righteousness. If this Galilean were of God, he would know sinners when he met them and he would treat them with the same holy disgust that we who are righteous do. He would share our high moral attitude."

Simon was merely following the common course pursued by all who seek to be justified by their own works. So they can reinforce their "what-a-good-boy-am-I" self-image, they must have some scandalous sinners around just for contrast. "Comparative morality" is the name of the game. You can spot the people who play this game by their "holier-than-thou" disdain and verbalized contempt for "people who live like that."

Nothing shakes a Pharisee's comfortable ethical security more quickly than to look around and find nobody behaving worse than he does!

Of course, Jesus knew the hollow heart of His host. So He set a parable before him:

"There was a certain creditor who had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will love him more?" (verses 41, 42).

Simon answered superciliously, "I suppose the one he forgave more" (verse 43).

Then Jesus nailed him: "You have rightly judged." By his own admission Simon saw the point and had thrown himself open for it to be applied to himself.

Next, the Lord forced him to face himself by insisting that he face the woman. "Do you see this woman?" Do you really see her, Simon? He did not. He only thought he did. His prejudiced eye saw only a sinful woman weeping and perfuming the feet of a man whom the crowds regarded as a prophet.

Simon did not see the real people there in his house that day. His spiritual blindness would not permit him to see the significance of those gushing tears and tender acts of worship. He did not recognize the redeemed because he refused to recognize the Redeemer.

Now let us go back for a moment to the parable itself.

Notice that two people owed the same creditor some money, the one ten times as much as the other. The one owed five hundred days' wages; the other owed fifty days' wages. Neither could pay; so the creditor freely forgave both.

In each case, forgiveness was an act of free grace. The one who owed the lesser amount could not claim any merit or advantage on the ground that his debt was not as large. He was just as unable to pay as was the other. Clearing his debt was as much an act of mercy as was clearing the other's.

This should have stung Simon, because in effect Jesus was saying to him, "Simon, you are also a sinner. If you are to be forgiven, you also must admit your need and your dependence on God's mercy. God owes you nothing."

We must be careful to avoid making this parable teach something that it does not teach. It does not teach that we must sin a lot in order to love God a lot. Some of God's most devoted saints never lived scandalous lives before their conversion; yet they are so sensitive to the holiness of God and the gracious mercies of Christ that they sense also the great sinfulness of sin. They view themselves as having been the chiefest of sinners. And now as Christians if they find anything in their lives that displeases God in the least, they are quick to fall on their knees in humble contrition.

The woman was forgiven, a fact evidenced by her great love for Jesus. Simon was not forgiven, a fact evidenced by the absence of love.

The others who were present showed no joy over the woman's salvation. Their unbelieving hearts only questioned, "Who is this who forgives sins also?" (verse 49). Ah, if they had only known!

Look at the difference that saving faith makes. To the believing woman Jesus declared, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

Peace! That was something she had not experienced in a long, long time. Those were the sweetest, kindest words that anyone had ever said to her. She heard them because she put her trust completely in Jesus.

Today they who believe will hear the same words and experience the same peace. The same Christ who transformed that woman's life now lives to transform all who come to Him.

3.

AN HONEST AND GOOD HEART

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On the same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea. And great multitudes were gathered together unto him, so that He got into a boat and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore.

He spoke many things to them in parables, saying: "Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell by the way side; and the birds came and devoured them. Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and immediately they sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched; and because they had no root they withered away. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprang up, and choked them. But others fell on good ground, and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

-Matthew 13:1-9

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It was one of Jesus' busy days in Galilee. During the morning the Master taught a large crowd of people. The demands of ministry pressed so heavily on Him that He found no time to eat.

The opposition was there, too, insolently demanding a sign. His family and friends accused Him of being crazy and came with the intention of taking Him away by force.

During the afternoon the Lord sat in a boat and delivered a whole group of parables to the throng assembled on the shore. Later He spoke a few more parables privately to His disciples.

That evening they crossed the Sea of Galilee in a storm. Jesus was so exhausted by then that He would have slept right through it had the disciples not awakened Him. After Jesus calmed the storm, they sailed on to the country of Gadara. There two demoniacs met the Master and were delivered. Fearful, the people of the region asked Him to leave, which He did, making another trip back across the Sea of Galilee that evening. Indeed, it had been a long day.

The first parable that Jesus spoke to the multitude that afternoon is commonly called the parable of the sower. It is recorded in all three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). We are following the account in Matthew.

The main focus of the parable is on the different kinds of ground. In each case the

sower was the same and the seed was the same. Only the ground was different, and that is what made all the difference.

Jesus Himself explained the parable to His disciples. We find His explanation in the same chapter, beginning with verse eighteen.

The seed is the word of God. The various types of ground are the widely differing heart-attitudes of those who hear.

First, as the sower broadcast the seed, some fell by the wayside. This was probably a footpath running alongside the edge of the field. Its surface was packed and hard. Any seed falling there stayed on the surface and was stepped on. The ground did not open up to it. Like the other seed, it had life in it and the ability to multiply. But it produced nothing. It was left for the taking, and soon the birds came along and devoured it.

These are the careless hearers. Their hearts are hard, closed to the word of the Lord. Whatever they might hear they do not understand because they do not wish to understand. It is not important to them. Other things have their attention.

Now Satan does not want that gospel seed lying around, not even on the surface. The person might wake up, notice it and become interested. So the devil sends the "birds" to snatch it away. It is easy. He simply replaces it with something else in their mind, something he knows will excite them, occupy their attention and divert them from the truth. The person had no heart-hold on it, anyway. It was merely lying there; so when the devil robbed them of it, they did not even notice that it was gone. It was like taking a diamond out of the hand of a sleeping baby.

It is like a starving man deeply engrossed in solving a fascinating puzzle. Someone sets a plate of life-saving food beside him. He smells the appetizing aroma, but is too mentally and emotionally involved in his pursuits to realize what is there and how vital it is to his welfare. *A little later*, he thinks, and continues the pursuit of the moment. Meanwhile, someone takes the plate away. He continues to ponder his puzzle, hardly noticing that his food is gone. Eventually he starves to death.

Does it sound insane? Spiritually people do it every day.

Then there is the rocky ground. The people knew what Jesus was referring to. In Galilee limestone rocks surface here and there in the fields. People farm around them. When the seed is scattered over the fields, some falls on these rocks. When the seed springs up, so does the sun, and the promising little sprout withers and dies.

Jesus said that these are the impulsive hearers. They respond quickly, but their response is tied to their emotions and is very changeable. The soil is insufficient. The decision is shallow. They will follow Jesus as long as they feel like it—as long as it is easy. But when the first real difficulty arises, they wilt and are gone.

These people wither away quickly for two reasons: no root and no moisture. No

root—no abiding principles, no firm grasp on the truth, no deep commitment, no determination to go all the way with Jesus come what may. No moisture—no follow-through in the means of grace, no consistent Bible reading, no prayer life, no faithfulness to the fellowship of the church, no proper spiritual care.

When someone says or does something they do not like, they stumble. When trouble or persecution comes along, they fall away. They are spiritual dropouts.

Next is the thorny ground—the crowded soil. These are the diverted hearers.

The soil here is fertile, so fertile that anything can grow in it. That is the problem. The heart is wide open to everything: to the cares of this age, to the deceitfulness of riches, to lusts of other things, to the pleasures of this life. All these things are able to sink their roots into the heart.

The word of God must have exclusive control of the heart. Our devotion to Christ must be just that—devotion, and not merely "one of the things we are involved in."

These people bring forth fruit, but not to completion. They become spiritual "scrubs." They go only so far. Then, somewhere along the way, they make the wrong value decisions. They set their hearts on the wrong things—and die. They do not drop out; they let themselves be choked out.

Wrong priorities are fatal. Colossians 3:2 commands us, "set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth."

Finally Jesus mentioned the good ground, the prepared soil. These are the diligent hearers. They are the only ones who really amount to anything, the only ones who receive God's approval, the only ones who get to Heaven.

What makes them different from all the rest? Luke 8:15 tells us: "But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience."

A noble and good heart! There it is! These people are not playing games with God. There is nothing phony about them. They mean business. When they hear the word of God, they keep it. These hearers bring forth fruit with patience. In an honest and good heart truth written becomes truth understood and truth understood becomes truth lived and experienced.

Hold onto the word of God. Hide it in your heart. Value it above all else. If you do, no one can take it from you.

God's word is living, dynamic, productive seed. We must get it into us. We must let it come alive in us. We must allow it to master us. We must allow it to multiply itself in us to the fullest extent of the capacity that God has given us—thirty, sixty, a hundredfold!

God wants the Bible to happen in us. We can be what it says, have what it says, do what it says. When the living, written word of God takes root inside an honest and good heart, it will produce its own beautiful fruit in the life.

And let us not overlook that word "patience." Jesus said that His words must abide in us (John 15:7). He made it clear that fruitfulness results from relationship with Him. And steadfastness is the very essence of a relationship. The seed produces fruit only if it has root. No root, no fruit.

God wants to reproduce His word in our conduct. He wants it to energize us, to become operative in us, to become visible in us, to be exemplified by us.

The power of God's word is sometimes explosive, especially in the demonstration of the miraculous. Scripture is the written revelation of the nature and purposes of God, and part of God's nature and purpose is miraculous. God is the God of miracles; then so must also His word be.

Yet we must keep in mind that the main thrust of the dynamic of Scripture is aimed at producing character in the believer. Character is forever. The sower sowed seeds, not firecrackers. The force of the word is the power of an endless life (Hebrews 7:16). The essence of that life is to know "the only true God, and Jesus Christ" (John 17:3). That is, it is a steadfast relationship. Its fruit is the image of Christ in us (Romans 8:29).

So let us press toward the mark, not stopping until we seize the prize. Let us open up honest and good hearts to the powerful, living word, and let it produce its delightful fruit abundantly in our lives.

4.

THE PATIENT FARMER

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And He said, "The kingdom of God as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how.

"For the earth yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head.

"But when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

-Mark 4:26-29

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This parable is easy to miss. Only Mark records it. We should be grateful that the Holy Spirit inspired its preservation in one of the gospel accounts, for it offers great encouragement to all who are involved in the Lord's work.

It is easy to step right over this parable and go directly from the parable of the sower to the parable of the mustard seed. So we shall pause and look closely at what Jesus said in this parable.

This parable joins the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the leaven in describing the growth and expansion of the kingdom. This parable focuses on the main instrument of that growth—the seed.

The seed, of course, is the word of God. The ground is the place where the word penetrates and does its work—the human heart.

The farmer in this parable is *not* the Lord. The Lord knows how the seed grows. This man does not. He is the human agent who sows the seed—the minister, teacher, parent, friend.

Furthermore, the harvest in this parable is not the end of the age. At His coming the Lord will put in His sickle and reap the final harvest. But here the reaper is the one who did the sowing and who does not know how the seed grows. This person is the gospel worker. The process is evangelism and the harvest is souls. Therefore, the parable is not about Christian growth and maturity.

Also, the parable does *not* teach that the farmer does nothing. He works hard to prepare the soil. He knows what, when and how to sow. He protects the field after it is planted. He knows when to reap the harvest, and he goes at it immediately and

energetically.

What Jesus tells us in this parable is that there are definite human limitations in the work of the kingdom. The sooner we learn this truth, the better.

The word of God has life in itself, independent of our efforts. Only the Holy Spirit can cause it to germinate and produce, and that we can trust Him to do. If we are to be effective workers, we must know distinctly what is our part and what is God's part. Paul wrote,

"I planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, neither he who waters; but God who gives the increase" (1 Corinthians 3:6, 7).

God is not going to sow, water, or reap. That is our business. We cannot produce the harvest. That is God's business. To do our part properly we need God's wisdom and blessing. And though we cannot do God's part, we can hinder the growth of the seed by carelessness and neglect.

In this parable Jesus talks essentially about what is outside of our power in contrast to what is within our power. He teaches us to depend on God and the vitality of His word in all of our labors for Him. This will succeed where a huge expenditure of fleshly, self-confident effort will not.

Knowing the boundary of our responsibility liberates us as Christian workers from what A. B. Bruce calls an "undefined, unlimited burden."

We can go to bed at night and sleep. God is faithful. The power in the seed is working.

In this parable Jesus is cautioning us against boastfulness on the one hand and discouragement on the other. He is telling us to be patient, just as He is patient. "Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain" (James 5:7).

The apparent absence of immediate results must not discourage us. We must leave the seed in the ground, out of sight. We must resist the urge to go out and dig it up to see if it is sprouting. Sometimes we are eager to rush God's part of the work. Our Lord reminds us that the seed has its own process. God is working in that process and that process involves time.

In what is beyond our power, as William Arnot says, "we are helpless, but not hopeless"!

This does not mean that we have nothing to do. The farmer slept well at night, confident that the seed was growing and that the harvest was coming. But he was awake and busy by day!

So keep sowing; keep watering; keep praying. God is growing His crop. Watch the Holy Spirit ripen conviction. Something on the inside is reaching up toward heaven. In time it will break through. The little blade will appear, then the head, then the ripe grain in the head. Each stage is a God-given promise of the next. Together they are His assurance of the harvest.

"Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy. He who continually goes forth weeping, bearing seed for sowing, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him" (Psalm 126:5, 6).

The farmer waits patiently for the harvest. But when it is ready, he acts immediately. How diligently he works to gather in the harvest as he keeps glancing up at the dark storm clouds gathering overhead! What had been a slow process is now an urgent crisis. Listen to our Lord's appeal:

"Do you not say, 'There are still four months, and then comes the harvest'? Behold, I say unto you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields; for they are already white for harvest" (John 4:35).

"The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest." (Matthew 9:37, 38).

Let us do our part and trust God to do His. We must wait patiently and prayerfully for the seed that we have sown and that we are watering to do its work.

But, look! Some of the seeds have sprung up! Over here stalks are rising! Over there whole fields are already ripe! God is giving the increase. Harvest time is upon us. But storm clouds are gathering. The Lord of the harvest is urgently calling for laborers. Quickly! It is time for all of us to get to the fields and go to work gathering the precious sheaves into the garner of our Lord.

5.

WHEAT AND TARES

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The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way.

But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared. So the servants of the owner came and said to him, "Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?"

He said to them, "An enemy has done this." The servants said to him, "Do you want us then to go and gather them up?"

But he said, "No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, 'First gather the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

He who sows the good seed is the Son of man. The field is the world; the good seed are the sons of the kingdom; but the tares are the sons of the wicked one. The enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels.

Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so will it be in the end of this age. The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

-Matthew 13:24-30, 37-43

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This is another of our Savior's parables of the kingdom. We are blessed in that we have not only the parable, but also our Lord's detailed explanation to the disciples.

This parable is quite different from that of the sower. There the ground is the heart; here "the field is the world." There the seed is the word of God; here the seeds are people.

One of the most common mistakes that people make in regard to this parable is to

interpret the field as the church. Please observe that the field is the world, not the church. This parable has nothing to do with church discipline. Jesus is talking about the problem of evil in the world.

We also observe that there are only two kinds of people in God's field, the world—wheat and tares. There are no half-saved or half-lost people. We are either children of the kingdom (wheat) or children of the wicked one (tares).

Now Jesus sows only good seed. His saving grace makes people good. He puts saints into society.

By contrast, the devil never produces righteousness. His seeds are always harmful. This is true even though many of them seem to be productive members of society. Some have even made outstanding contributions to human well-being. The fact remains that they are in unbelief. Their hearts are not right in the sight of God.

They do not truly love God and therefore they do not obey Him. Consequently their spiritual example and influence are detrimental to the highest interests of God and society, and this far out-weighs any positive temporal contributions they might make. In fact, the greater their influence, the greater is the damage they do to God's kingdom, honor and authority. Likewise, the greater is the damage that they do to a world whose vital and eternal well-being depends upon heart-obedience to the King and adherence to the principles of His kingdom. In other words, they are destroying souls.

We notice also that the devil is an imitator. He is never original. He takes what God has made and comes up with an imitation, a distortion, a perversion.

And the devil works in darkness. The enemy sows his seeds while people are asleep (verse 25).

What Jesus described in this parable was a frequent practice in that time. Sowing tares in someone else's field after the good seed had been sown was a way of getting even or taking out one's spite.

The tares were probably darnel, a gray, semi-poisonous weed so similar to wheat that one could not tell them apart until they headed out.

In the parable the servants asked the householder three questions. The first one assumes its own answer: "Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field?" Of course He did.

"How then does it have tares?" In other words, where did the sinners come from?

God created everyone and He created no one evil. God does not make a sinner out of anyone. Satan takes what God has created and corrupts it. He tempts. He appeals through the world and the flesh. He leads people into sin.

The moral character of the darnel is the result of their own choice. They chose to

yield to the influences of the enemy. They became his poisonous seed in God's world.

The third question is crucial: "Do you want us then to go and gather them up?" What should God do about the evil that is present in the world? It is a question many are asking.

"Why does God allow people to do what they are doing?" they ask. "Why does God allow wicked people to live? Why doesn't He send judgment on wicked nations? Why doesn't He stop all wars?"

Please notice that often the people who blame God for not stopping evil in the world are the very ones who resist Him with all their hearts when He tries to turn them from their own sins. They want Him to stop others from sinning, but to leave them alone.

Now, should we undertake to eliminate all the unrighteous from society? No. That is not the church's business. True, we must stay awake. We should pray and work to prevent the enemy from placing darnel in positions of power and influence in society. But vengeance belongs only to God. "But those who are outside God judges" (1 Corinthians 5:13) --that is, those who are outside of the kingdom of God and the household of faith.

Roots become intertwined. Families and communities contain both believers and unbelievers. Both are woven into the fabric of society. Both occupy the same land and live in the same socio-economic structure. Society will continue to experience the protection provided by the presence of the Church as long as the Church is in the world. This we learned from God's dealings with Sodom. If only ten righteous had been there, the whole place would have been spared for their sakes.

Evil will continue to grow side by side with the good. In this present age, God's judgments on wicked nations that include some genuine Christians in their population are limited in their severity. This is the age of grace, of opportunity for salvation. The gospel is God's program now. Total judgment will come later—perhaps soon. And come it will. Jesus said, "Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted" (Matthew 15:13).

There were three ways to separate the darnel or tares from the wheat. If only a few kernels were mixed in with the wheat, the women would pick them out by hand when the wheat was ground into flour. Jesus implied that there were too many children of the wicked one for this method.

Wheat usually grew taller than darnel, making it practical in some harvest operations to clip off the wheat heads without touching the darnel. After the wheat was harvested in this manner, the whole field was burned.

The third method was to separate the stocks of darnel from the wheat at harvest time, tie them in bundles, and leave them in the field to be burned. The wheat was taken safely to the barn, of course. This seemed to be the practice when there were big clumps of darnel growing here and there throughout the field. This is the method Jesus

described in the parable.

Christ's angels shall remove every sinner out of His kingdom. "Then the righteous will shine forth" (verse 43).

Where are we now in the Householder's schedule? How close is the crop to the harvest?

The difference between the wheat and the tares is becoming more evident every day. This means the harvest is ripening. Time is running out. The day of grace and salvation is nearing its end.

This is no time for Christians to compromise, no time to blend into the world's ways. It is time to come out from among them and be separate from their carnal deeds. We must abstain from every form or appearance of evil (1 Thessalonians 5:22). We must so live that all can clearly see the difference between Christians and non-Christians.

Friend, may I ask where you stand? Are you right with God? If Christ should come this moment, would you be ready to meet Him, or would you be cast into the fire? This is a most serious matter.

Jesus said, "By their fruits you will know them" (Matthew 7:20). What kind of character and conduct is your life exhibiting? What does your attitude and your behavior reveal about your identity and your destiny?

The Bible says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17). The saving, transforming power of Jesus Christ can make you what you ought to be. Please do not wait. The end of the age is upon us.

Come to Jesus Christ now.

6.

GOD STARTS SMALL

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The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds, but when it is grown, it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.

-Matthew 13:31, 32

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According to an old tradition, when Darius, the Persian monarch, wanted to impress Alexander the Great with the size of his army, he sent the Greek general a barrel of sesame seeds. Alexander replied by sending the king a bag of mustard seeds. This was his way of saying to his foe, "Your soldiers are many, but mine are aggressive and fearless. They have what it takes."

Jesus had just given two parables containing features that were not encouraging. In the parable of the sower many seeds were lost, plants withered and some were choked out.

Only a part bore fruit to maturity. In the parable of the wheat and tares, the evil were present among the good.

Besides, the opposition of the authorities was increasing. Jesus had not liberated Israel from the Romans and was showing no intention of doing so. He was teaching and demonstrating the qualities of the meek and lowly, not the high and mighty.

What was happening? Perhaps the disciples were puzzled and apprehensive. Would this enterprise ever succeed? What would be the outcome?

So Jesus spoke a parable of victory and triumph, of the success of the tiny but vital. In fact, Jesus spoke two such parables, the twin parables of the mustard seed and the leaven. The former portrayed the external and visible growth of God's kingdom; the latter emphasized the internal and invisible moral power of the kingdom.

Jesus repeated these two parables later in Judea just after He had healed the woman with the spirit of infirmity and silenced the ruler of the synagogue. What an appropriate occasion that was for Jesus to repeat these parables. The miracle-working power of God is in this gospel, brushing aside dead traditions, setting people free and bringing them life and joy. It must grow. *It will grow. It will prevail.*

The parables of the kingdom focus upon the gracious activity of God in the earth, the growth and influence of His truth, and the expansion of His moral authority during this

present age. They look beyond the present age, but this age is their primary focus. The present phase of the kingdom is gradual, progressive. The future phase is sudden, coming directly from heaven.

In this present age the Church is the domain where the King now rules, where His principles are in effect, where His truth, authority and power now reside on earth. Because the kingdom is now operating in and through the Church, as the Church advances, so does the kingdom in this world. The King ought to rule the whole earth, and some day He will. Now His rule is in effect where He is obeyed, that is, in the hearts of believers. As more submit to Him and receive His grace, His Church grows and therefore His kingdom prospers.

We now return to Galilee and give our attention to the parable of the mustard seed as Jesus first spoke it to the multitude standing on the seashore.

In this parable the Lord tells us that He put the germinating elements of His kingdom in the tiny seed of His Church and planted the tiny seed in this great, big world. It went practically unnoticed at the time, but not for long.

The symbolism of the mustard seed was not new to the people of that day, for even then it was common for them to speak proverbially of the mustard seed as the smallest of all and the symbol of things tiny but powerful. This reminds us of our Lord's words recorded in Matthew 17:20, "If you have faith as a mustard seed..."

Also, the fact that God's sovereign purposes in human affairs progress from little to big was a truth established in the Jewish mind from such passages as Ezekiel 17:22-24 and Daniel 2:34-45.

God's ways are very often the opposite of man's. We want to start big. God starts small, with things that seem insignificant but that contain dynamic life and earth-conquering power. This is the testimony of 1 Corinthians 1:27-29. "God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty."

God became man through the miracle of the incarnation. Where did He enter the world? In a manger in Bethlehem.

"Can there anything good come out of Nazareth," Nathanael sneered. "Come and see" was Philip's quiet reply (John 1:46).

A quiet, lifeless figure on a cross. A cold, sealed tomb. Frightened, hiding disciples. Can the kingdom of God come out of this? By the power of God, yes!

Jesus said it: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone: but if it dies, it produces much grain" (John 12:24). It is one of the principles of the kingdom.

Jesus referred to His disciples as a little flock. A hundred and twenty in an upper room with no social status, no political influence, no military might, no wealth, no high

educational attainments, nothing by the world's standards. Is this the seed from which the mighty kingdom of God would grow in the world?

It seemed ridiculous from a human standpoint. God's answer was the day of Pentecost. A Spirit-filled fisherman preached and three thousand received eternal life and were added to the Church. The seed literally sprang out of the ground and it has been growing ever since!

It is the Lord's planting. It is pungent, potent, alive. The word of God is growing mightily and prevailing. The Holy Spirit is at work, convicting and saving. The love of God is filling hearts. Miracles are happening. The kingdom is thriving and people are coming alive!

Jesus spoke the truth. It is happening just as He predicted. The gospel has not failed. The kingdom is growing. The Church will triumph in her Lord!

Although the mustard plant is properly an herb, it grows to the size and appearance of a tree, attaining a height of twelve feet, with leaves that spread out like branches.

All the true branches spring out of Christ and are firmly joined into Him. Not all of the branches are alike in form or appearance. Some are larger than others. They grow out in different directions. Some birds nest in one, some in another. The real test is whether or not the branches are truly fastened to Christ.

Jesus taught that the Church is universal, but He did not teach universalism, the false teaching that all will be saved. The Church reaches out to "whosoever will." All may come, hear, believe, and be saved. But many lodge in its branches who never truly know the saving grace of its Redeemer.

Yes, here come the birds! The branches of the mustard plant bear tasty black seeds that the birds love. Some come to eat, others to exploit. Bigness has its problems, even in the kingdom. When the Church tied in with the structures of society, particularly the State, its branches became weighted with all kinds of things that are foreign to its true nature. Christianity became that loaded down, top-heavy plant called Christendom. Kings and prelates misused it. Even today there are those who value it only for their own ends.

Away with such encumbering birds! Let the tree be what God planted! Let its dynamic life energize freely in the earth. Let the truly hungry come and feast.

Yes, God starts small, but ends big. The mighty symphony comes from the individual note. The most eloquent prose and expressive poetry flows from a mere alphabet. Mighty industries rise from the basic principles embodied in simple inventions.

It is that way in the kingdom of God. Who could predict that the great Sunday School movement would spring from the efforts of one man, Robert Raikes, to gather some children from the streets to teach them the word of God? A mighty missionary

enterprise began in a prayer meeting in a haystack. Some great churches trace their beginnings to a humble storefront mission or a little tent on a vacant lot. "For who has despised the day of small things?" (Zechariah 4:10)

Christian, "do not grow weary in well doing" (2 Thessalonians 3:13). Pastor, do not be discouraged. "Your labor is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 15:58). The power of the Holy Spirit is in that little congregation. The principles of the kingdom are at work there. It is going to grow. Jesus said so. Do not forget Psalm 126:5 and 6. There is rejoicing ahead!

So keep on sowing, watering and reaping. The kingdom is at work among us. That Sunday School class will produce saints and stalwarts in the faith. Your friends and loved ones will be touched. People will be saved as you faithfully labor, pray and believe. 1 Corinthians 3:7 says that God will give the increase. It is His sure promise.

7.

THE QUIET REVOLUTION

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The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened.

-Matthew 13:33

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Long ago, Roman fathers had the "right" to decide whether their newborn children would live or die. Ancient Phrygians commonly sold their own children as slaves. In one part of the world until modern times widows were burned alive on the funeral pyres of their deceased husbands.

But something has changed all that and many things like that wherever its influence has permeated society. What is it? What has made the difference? *The kingdom of God.*

Jesus talked about the moral influence of the kingdom in the parable of the leaven, the twin of the parable of the mustard seed. He gave these parables first to the multitude gathered on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and later in a synagogue in Judea.

The mustard seed parable illustrates the outward, visible growth of the kingdom during the present age. The parable of the leaven emphasizes the inward, invisible moral influence of the principles of the kingdom.

Like so many other parables, it also suffers from over-interpretation. The woman does not signify anything in particular. She is merely part of the structure of the parable. Neither do the three measures of meal represent three of anything. It just happened to be the usual amount for the average family. The leaven is what is important.

Leaven was not yeast. Rather, it was a sour dough. When something was needed to lighten the bread, some juices were added to a piece of old dough to activate it, and the piece was placed in the new lump of dough.

In Scripture leaven is usually a type or symbol of the corrupting power of evil. But such is not the case here. Here leaven is used in a good sense to signify the principles of the kingdom of God residing in the Church and therefore affecting society in a positive way.

In this parable Jesus defined the kingdom of God in this present age as spiritual. It is the moral rule of God in the hearts and lives of believers living in a society that is spiritually dead.

The kingdom is not a product of society, but was introduced into society from Heaven. It came in quietly, almost unobserved. It went largely unnoticed by the kingdoms of this world. Jesus said, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:20, 21).

He also said, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). It penetrates not by force but by influence. It is not a corporation on the stock exchange, or an organization to be joined, or a system to be promoted.

Jesus was not a noisy revolutionary. "He shall not quarrel nor cry out; nor will anyone hear His voice in the streets" (Matthew 12:19). But His power liberated the woman bowed down with a spirit of infirmity, silenced His enemies, and filled the people with joy. Thus the stage was set for Him to repeat the parable (Luke 13:20, 21).

The parable of the leaven emphasizes the quiet, steady influence of the kingdom and its message. In this showy, promotional, media-conscious time we need to be reminded that the primary mode for the dissemination of the faith is personal influence. We need public proclamation, of course, but truth diffuses mainly through relationships. Life touches life, and each life that is changed changes society by that much. When enough lives are changed, the cultural structures themselves are bound to change.

Now Jesus did not teach that the whole world will be saved. Neither did He teach that sinners will improve. In fact, sinners will get worse and worse (2 Timothy 3:13).

What the Lord taught is that the principles of the kingdom will permeate society, leavening it, lightening up the intolerable weight of its selfishness.

"Opiate of the people"? Not the kingdom of God! Its spiritual and moral ferment disturbs the "lump." The principles of the kingdom active in believers who are present in any social system will force that system to react. It was so in the life and ministry of Jesus. It was so in the early days of Christianity. It is so today.

Listen to this— "These men, being Jews, exceedingly trouble our city" (Acts 16:20). "These who have turned the world upside down have come here too" (Acts 17:6).

Wherever Christian principles influence public thinking, there the kingdom is having an effect. Wherever these principles bring about a modification of public opinion, customs and laws, there it is leavening the lump.

The influence of the leaven is *in* the lump, not *on* it. The kingdom grows by influence, not by force. The positive moral ferment produced within society by the kingdom comes from the dynamic of changed hearts and lives. We leaven the world by being in the world. There is no monastic isolationism in the Great Commission!

But though we are *in* the world, we are not *of* the world. Jesus prayed, "I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil

one" (John 17:15). The leaven influences the lump, not the other way around. If the principles of the kingdom are alive and active in us, we will affect our world, but the world will not corrupt us.

"You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4).

If the world is corrupting you and squeezing you into its mold, if you are compromising and going along with the crowd, if your life does not have a spiritual impact on those around you, the principles of the kingdom are not alive in you. You need to submit to the King and let Him bring His kingdom into you.

God has not called us to be an ingrown sub-culture, but an effective counter-culture. As the principles of the kingdom work in us, we will affect our social environment. Our lives will confront it and overcome it. We will disturb it, challenge it, force it to react, modify it, bring life to it, and neutralize some of its corrupting influence.

It is bound to happen. "For the kingdom of God is not in word but in power" (1 Corinthians 4:20).

So each of us who profess to be Christians must ask ourselves, "What is my influence on others? Is the kingdom of God in me? Does it go wherever I go? Is my life leavening my world—my home, place of business or employment, school, community? Am I willing for God to put me in a position where I can make a difference? Do people know what I stand for, and does that have an impact on them?"

Yes, this gospel shall be preached in all the world, including our own personal world.

"But why do I have to be around so many ungodly people?" you ask. Because you are their light and their salt. You bring the kingdom of God to them. You are the leaven in that place. Your life and witness, your faith and victory, bring the principles and power of the kingdom of God into that "lump."

Liven it up! "For the kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17). Because you are there, the kingdom is there. Let that make a difference. Let them see things in you that are not of this world—righteousness, peace and joy!

8.

THE JOY OF DISCOVERY

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

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

-Matthew 13:44-46

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How it got there we do not know. Perhaps some well-to-do Palestinian family had been forced to flee before an invading army. Panic-stricken, they pulled together a few necessities and prepared to escape.

At the last moment they took the family treasures—gold, silver, jewels—and buried them in the safest place they could find. Later they would return and reclaim their family fortune.

But it was never to be. The devastating waves of war rolled over the land and swallowed them up, and their secret perished with them.

Time went by. Decades, perhaps centuries added their camouflage to the land. Generations walked over the hidden treasure unaware of its presence.

Then one day a man happened upon that part of the field. What was he doing there? We do not know. Perhaps he was a hired hand moving brush and stones to provide more land for planting.

Suddenly, *clonk!* His tool hit something. What is this? Curiously he grubbed around the mysterious object. A few strokes revealed the rusted remains of an old chest. All at once a corner gave way under his mattock and his eyes caught the sparkle of a lost fortune.

Startled, his mouth jerked open and he sucked in his breath. For a moment he just stood there, stunned, his eyes wide in amazement.

Quickly he recovered his wits and began digging feverishly. It turned out to be a bigger find than it first appeared to be. His heart pounded and he felt himself trembling with excitement. His mind reeled from a flood of thoughts. What? Who? When? Why?

The joy of discovery was so intense he wanted to raise his arms and shout!

It took all he had to restrain himself. "I've got to get ahold of myself," he muttered half-aloud. "Think, man, *think*." Nobody is around. No one must know. Be calm and act naturally.

First, hide the treasure. Then come up with a believable excuse to buy this field. Go. Sell *everything*. Whatever it takes, *buy this field*.

Now the scene changes. We are following a pearl merchant on his quest for prize gems. Unlike the first man, this fellow is leaving nothing to chance. If he finds his prize, it will be because he knows what he is after and is looking for it diligently.

He travels the bazaars of the ancient East, hot on the trail of the fabulous pearls. Perhaps a few coins will buy him a tip on a rare pearl somewhere in the wealthy district of a nearby city.

With high hopes he covers the distance. Maybe he finds the new attraction, maybe not. Even if he does, it might be just another disappointment.

He has seen so many, and they all fall short. Is there really a pearl out there somewhere that is worth the search? Is it too much to hope for?

Despite his misgivings, something deep inside drives him on.

Then one day someone tells him about a gem so beautiful, so perfect, so precious, that it strains his credulity. The person testifies that he has seen it for himself and can direct him to it.

In desperation he decides to listen. It is either believe now or else give up the quest altogether and sink into disillusion and cynicism.

Surprisingly it is not far off. Is it among the wealthy, the noble, the powerful? No. The path is plain and simple, so much so he had overlooked it.

Following the narrow lane he came directly to the object of his search. Outwardly there was nothing attractive. The case was rough-hewn wood.

His pride would have turned him away. But the longing in his soul urged him to reach out and take it, open it, look at it.

And so he did. It was an act of simple faith, but that act of faith opened a world of joy beyond anything he could have imagined.

There it lay, a stunning beauty, a gem beyond his wildest hopes and dreams. There cannot possibly be another like it. It is priceless!

Sell all the other pearls. They have lost their luster. This one alone satisfies, and

satisfies completely. It fulfills the noblest quest of the soul!

Now what is Jesus teaching us in the twin parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price?

First, we turn the question around and ask what our Lord did *not* teach.

He did not even comment on the ethics of the man who concealed the treasure from the owner of the field. That is another matter and has no bearing on the point Jesus was making.

He was teaching nothing about the nature of pearls, but only emphasizing the surpassing value of the one Pearl of Great Price—Himself.

He was certainly not teaching that we can *buy* the kingdom of God. Salvation is the free gift of God's grace received by faith alone.

Lastly, He is not teaching that God is hiding from us, to be found only by a lucky few. He will be found of all who seek him with the whole heart, as He promised in Jeremiah 29:13, "You will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart." The gospel invitation is to all.

What did Jesus teach in these parables? In the first parable Christ informed us that there is a priceless spiritual treasure, and it is hidden from the careless and the profane.

Yet God is able to reach through to some, usually at a crisis point in their lives. At that crucial moment they really pay attention to God, discover the treasure—new life in Christ—and gladly grasp it as their own, personally. The heart is changed and the life is transformed. Petty selfish concerns, once held so tightly, are gladly relinquished as the soul seizes the true riches. As a man drops a handful of gravel to grasp a handful of diamonds, just so the heart gladly relinquishes all for Christ.

The King and His kingdom are worth far more than anything we give up for it. And some things must be surrendered for the kingdom. Self must yield to the King; and when self yields, all yields. Then the treasure is discovered and the pearl is found. This emphasis is carried on through and expanded in the second parable.

How valuable is the kingdom of God? Look at the eagerness of those who truly find it to give all for it!

The rich young ruler yearned for eternal life, but he refused to surrender the love of his possessions. Slowly, sadly, he walked away (Mark 10:22). In contrast, Philip could hardly contain his excitement as he rushed to his brother Nathanael to break the news, "We have found Him!" (John 1:45). Which would you like to be?

If only people would realize the joy God has in store for them! The devil has deceived many into thinking that becoming a Christian means the end of their happiness. They refuse the invitation to the banquet for fear they will have to let go of

the moldy crusts of sinful pleasure. So they miss real life, real joy.

Jesus surprises some people, such as Nathanael and the woman at the well (John 4). Suddenly they discover that in Him "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:3). Gladly the heart drops its petty idols and embraces Him.

The Ethiopian eunuch sat searching the Scriptures. God saw the quest of his soul and sent Philip the evangelist to preach Christ to him. He received the Savior and went on his way rejoicing (Acts 8:39).

Saul of Tarsus was a Pharisee of the Pharisees with a head full of religion but an empty heart. One day Jesus invaded his life and everything changed. Later he wrote joyfully, "But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. But indeed I also count all things but loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish, that I may gain Christ" (Philippians 3:7, 8).

How can we consider those things that are loss for Christ to have any value? In his Confessions Augustine testified: "What I feared to be parted from was now a joy to surrender."

Martin Luther struggled with his sins, depriving himself ascetically in his search for righteousness and peace. Then one day it dawned on him, "*The just shall live by faith.*" Neither Martin Luther nor the world was the same after that.

We cannot serve two masters. The kingdom demands full surrender, full dedication, because it is worth nothing less. First Peter 2:7 says it well: "Therefore, to you who believe, He is precious."

Heaven is free, but it is not cheap. Spiritual bargain hunters are only fooling themselves. Christ is worth everything. If we do not value Him above all else, we need to question whether or not we have truly found Him. At least we need a soul-vision of how precious He truly is.

Have you made the discovery? Has Christ changed your life? Have you abandoned all for Christ?

Do not settle for imitations. Be sure you have the Pearl of Great Price.

9.

WHEN THE FINAL PULL COMES

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Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind, which, when it was full, they drew to shore; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but threw the bad away.

So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just, and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.

-Matthew 13:47-50

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The scene that Jesus described in this parable was a familiar part of daily life around the Sea of Galilee.

In our minds we picture some Galilean fishermen in a boat letting out a net. The seine slithers through the water in a semi-circle perhaps half a mile long. Floats hold up the top and weights keep the bottom edge down deep.

Once the fish are encircled, the fishermen begin the long task of drawing in the net. Little by little the circle shrinks. The fish still swim around freely, simply avoiding the mysterious strands. But they are not truly free, for they are prisoners of an inevitable fate.

Suddenly time runs out. The illusion of freedom ends abruptly. Jerked from their familiar element, they lie helpless and trembling on the shore.

Eager hands pick them up one by one and keen eyes inspect them carefully. Some are placed in containers; others are flung away for scavengers to devour.

In this parable the Master is focusing on the climax of God's program for this present world. Like its companion, the parable of the wheat and the tares, it also has been much misinterpreted. It is not talking about the Church, or about the good or bad in the visible Church. It has nothing to do with evangelism; for the time-setting of the parable is not now, but later. Jesus is calling our attention to the final judgment, when God will completely and permanently eliminate sin and sinners from orderly society.

All of us who swim in the vast sea of time will someday reach its boundary on the timeless shore of eternity. It happens for each of us at death, and it will happen for the whole world at the judgment. God's word is clear: "It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27).

No matter how free we feel to swim around now, we are all encircled in a shrinking net. We move about as we desire, avoiding the annoying seine. All the while, time and opportunity are running out. We are being drawn in one direction and we cannot go back.

Suddenly, the end! God has "appointed a day on the which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all, by raising Him from the dead" (Acts 17:31).

Jesus said it will be a time of separation. The angels are the gatherers and sorters. They are God's agents carrying out His decisions with exact precision.

The process is methodical and complete. The scrutiny is thorough. There will be no mistake. Each is given personal and full attention. Each answers for himself alone.

Only one consideration determines the verdict: are we good or bad? Size, shape and strength matter not. If Christ is in you, the angels will recognize Him. If He is not, they will know it.

If the principles of His kingdom have no place in a person's heart and life, if His love is not there, if there is no commitment to His holy will, of what use would that person be in Heaven? Of what use would Heaven be to that soul? Such persons could have no joy there, for they have prepared themselves for a different destiny.

Also the separation will be final. Choices will have become fixed. Character will have been firmly molded. There will be no turning back from either heaven or hell.

Let us ask ourselves, "Would my present lifestyle fit heaven? Would I be of any use to God and His kingdom with my present attitude toward Him and His will? Does the King rule my heart, and do His principles control my life? Does the Bible determine my choices?"

The only wise course is to surrender our hearts to Christ and trust Him as our Savior now. Then we will be ready when the final pull on the net comes.

10.

INSTRUCTED CONCERNING THE KINGDOM

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Jesus said to them, "Have you understood all these things?" They say to Him, "Yes, Lord."

Then He said to them, "Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old."

-Matthew 13:51, 52

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Today's minister of the gospel is the target of a variety of pressures.

First, there is the good, wholesome pressure of Christ's love. "For the love of Christ constrains us," Paul said (2 Corinthians 5:14). This is positive, productive pressure. The Holy Spirit mobilizes this mighty force and directs it wisely to the salvation of the lost and the edification of believers.

But mingled with this divinely-prompted energy come other pressures, some subtle and counter-productive.

There is pressure to measure success by statistical criteria. We thank God for every far-reaching ministry that He has raised up. And we value every resource that will help us in our work. God requires us to do our best as faithful stewards. There is no place in the program of God these days for a lazy preacher!

The danger lies in listening to so many voices and being awed by so many success stories that we lose sight of God's goals for our own lives and ministries.

Personalities can overwhelm us. Good examples challenge and instruct us, but trying to be exactly like someone else can demoralize us. The Holy Spirit is able to liberate us to become what God intends us to be.

We must beware of the strong pressure to emulate wrong examples. Many ministers have judged their personal spiritual state by the success of their ministry, even if there has been ethical failure. It is very easy to assume that we have God's approval because He is blessing our ministry. This is a fatal trap. It is the wrong criterion. There is only one standard for all believers and that is Jesus Christ.

Might does not make right, even in the kingdom of God. The fact that a clergyman is popular and powerful is no guarantee that he is right. Big crowds, spectacular buildings, awesome programs and broad recognition might or might not follow faithful ministry.

But they are not proof of personal integrity. In the sight of God they certainly do not compensate for moral misconduct or doctrinal error.

We must also resist the pressure of fads. Many of us have been around long enough to see a number of fads come and go. As each one passes we are reinforced in our conviction that *the basics are what really count*.

Be faithful. Preach the word and live it. Be a person of prayer and faith. Act wisely and prudently. Love the people and minister to them in the power of the Spirit. If you will do this, you will succeed whether you are struggling along with twenty or rolling along with two thousand.

Jesus had just given His disciples a series of parables on the kingdom. At the close He asked them, "Have you understood all these things?" "Yes, Lord," they replied confidently.

Then He gave them another parable, one especially appropriate for ministers. It is sometimes called the parable of the householder.

In Jesus' question the word "all" is important. "Have you understood *all* these things?"

All the truths of Scripture inter-relate. History, prophecy, poetry, Gospels, Epistles—all integrate perfectly. For a clear understanding of the kingdom it is necessary to see all parts in their interrelationship within the whole. If we are to be successful ministers of the word, we must have a full and balanced understanding of the whole counsel of God.

"Yes, Lord," the disciples said, claiming to understand all the teachings Christ had just given them concerning the kingdom. And the Lord took them at their word. By saying "therefore" He built upon their answer.

"Scribe" was a term they understood. Since the days of Ezra the scribes were the authoritative Bible expositors. And so the disciples knew now what the Master intended *them* to be—authoritative expositors of the word of God.

The same charge is ours today. If we are faithful to our Lord and to the commission He has given us, we will turn a deaf ear to all who would counsel us to preach a human-centered rather than a God-centered message.

The hurts of humanity cannot be healed by avoiding the reality of sin (as Biblically defined), repentance, and faith in Jesus Christ and His redemptive work on the cross. "Be reconciled to God" must be our message if the sin-burdened are to find true wholeness and self-worth.

Yet it is not enough to have merely a head-knowledge of the word. "The hard-working farmer must be first to partake of the crops" (2 Timothy 2:6). We are called to be examples "in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity" (1 Timothy 4:12).

To be "instructed concerning the kingdom" means to be made a disciple of the kingdom. Whatever we teach we must model. Whatever we preach we must live. To lead others along the path of Biblical living, we must be walking in it ourselves.

As we do, we shall be like a householder (house-ruler) who brings out of his storeroom things that are new and things that are old. We shall bring out Old Testament truth in New Testament light. We bring new practical fruit from old Biblical roots. We make new timely applications of old, timeless principles.

The true minister of the gospel is like the head chef at the White House or Buckingham Palace. He has some very important people to feed—God's people. No warmed-over snack will do. The storeroom should be well stocked with the nourishing food of the word, and the table should be set lavishly.

What we have in our storeroom is what we feed the people. A lot of spiritual junk food is on the market and some people have developed an appetite for it. If we feed on it ourselves and stock our shelves with it, that is what we will feed God's people. But it will not nourish the soul, neither theirs nor ours.

Let us make sure that we give them the riches of Christ, not fads, fancies and foam. Part of our responsibility is to develop in them an appetite for wholesome spiritual food.

I remember well the words of Leland R. Keys to our class of ministerial students many years ago: "If you want to build great saints, feed them great food." That admonition was never more timely than today.

"Brings out" literally means "casts out." If the minister's storeroom is stocked with the riches of Christ, if his heart and mind are full of Scripture, and if he has prepared the spiritual food with recipes that are hermeneutically and homiletically sound, the nourishing truth will pop out of the oven of diligent preparation.

The Holy Spirit knows how to flavor it just right and to send its delicious aroma to the waiting "household," whetting their appetites for solid spiritual nourishment.

"Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season?" (Matthew 24:45).

11.

HANDS OFF THE OTHER PERSON'S THROAT!

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Then Peter came to Him and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"

Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times: but up to seventy times seven.

"Therefore is the kingdom of heaven like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife, and children and all that he had, and that payment be made.

"The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt.

"But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!'

"So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will pay you all.' But he would not: but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt.

"So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done.

"Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?'

"And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him.

"So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses."

-Matthew 18:21-35

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The floor was a sticky mess. A new, young employee at the Stayton (Oregon) Canning Company had dozed off, and the syrup was overflowing.

Fortunately for him, his supervisor was a Christian. Instead of firing the young man, Mr. Hamilton gave him two things: an appropriate lecture and another chance.

Years went by. The young man rose on the job to become a foreman himself. One day another new employee sat at that same machine—and dozed off. Again the syrup overflowed. This time the employee was fired—by the very man who had made the same mistake years before.

Mr. Hamilton looked straight into the younger foreman's eyes and said, "How soon we forget."

Peter had just asked Jesus an important question: "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"

Peter probably thought he was being generous in suggesting seven times. After all, the rabbis said three times was enough. But Jesus brushed aside such legalistic limits and got to the real principle. "I do not say to you, up to seven times; but up to seventy times seven." Then He gave the parable of the unmerciful servant.

In the parable the king's servant had so abused his position of trust and mismanaged the resources placed in his care that by the time he was caught, he owed his sovereign over ten million dollars. In the social system of the time that meant he must repay or else! Panic-stricken, he promised to repay all.

He must have known that he could never repay such a debt, but he was ready to promise anything to get off the hook.

As later events bore out, there was no genuine sorrow for his sins, only fear of consequences. He was not converted, just frightened. He never faced the real moral issue. His heart never changed. His desire to escape punishment was motivated by the same self-interest that had motivated him to embezzle his master's money. Self was his chief concern in everything.

Nevertheless, the king was moved with compassion and forgave him the debt.

"But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!'

How could a person who had just escaped a life-ruining ten million dollar debt put his hands on the throat of another man for a small amount by comparison? Obviously mercy did not make much of an impression on him. How soon he forgot!

His fellow-servants' sense of fairness was outraged. They reported the incident to the king, and the miserable ingrate was summoned and given what he deserved.

Now before we look at what the parable teaches, it is important to look at what it does not teach.

Jesus did not approve the practice of jailing people and selling their families for debts. He merely referred to it as a fact of life in that day.

The king delivered the man to the tormentors "till he should pay all that was due unto him" (verse 34). There is no hint of purgatory in these words. The point is the man could never pay such a debt.

Neither does the parable teach vindictiveness. It teaches that justice parallels justice and mercy parallels mercy.

In this parable the Lord Jesus shows us that when we were in our sins, we were morally and spiritually bankrupt before God. We could never pay the debt. Our good works could never clear our account.

Also the moral debts others might owe us are trivial by comparison. If we truly perceive the magnitude of our wrongs against God and of His mercy toward us in Christ, we cannot demand stern justice for those who have wronged us. Neither can we feel or speak as strongly about the wrongs done to us as we do about our wrongs against Him.

Furthermore, Jesus teaches us that God is willing to forgive, fully and freely. Nevertheless, forgiveness has conditions. Salvation is free, but it is not without obligation. The cross stands as God's awesome answer to the subversive notion that pardon is cheap. The king was willing to cancel the debt, thus taking the total loss on himself. The merciful disposition of the king was greater than the servant's debt. The issue was not the king's willingness to forgive, but the fact that the servant did not meet the necessary condition. It was not the servant's debt that blocked mercy, but his attitude.

Divine mercy and human mercy are two meshed gears. The gear of God's mercy drives the gear of human mercy. But if we lock the gear of human mercy, we lock the gear of divine mercy toward us.

Jesus taught this fact very clearly: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Matthew 5:7). "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). "And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses" (Mark 11:25, 26).

Man-to-man reconciliation operates according to the same principles of moral propriety as man-to-God reconciliation. The willingness to forgive must be present in both, and mercy must flow freely in both when the conditions of repentance and faith are present. The actual exercise of mercy is conditional, but the disposition to mercy must be unconditional.

Although we do not show mercy to merit mercy (or to make God merciful toward us), we nevertheless must show mercy in response to mercy. If we have been pardoned, we will pardon. If we refuse to pardon, we have not been pardoned. If mercy is not in our hearts, we have not truly received it. They who have received mercy have a merciful heart. They are in fellowship with the Source of mercy.

Injuries, offenses, and grudges are like rocks. People who collect them carry a load that gets heavier with each addition. People who throw them away enjoy relief and freedom from an unbearable burden.

Some people get just enough religion to make them opinionated, self-righteous, harsh, and judgmental. But the forgiven person lives under grace and gives grace. Saved people use their civil rights in a civil manner.

Many who cry out against human injustices have never realized the greatness of their injustices against God. They demand the payment of social debts, but count as nothing their own moral debt to the Almighty. Let us confess our sins before we even think about demanding our rights.

Is the evidence of mercy in our lives? Father, mother, have you forgiven your son or daughter? Son, daughter, have you forgiven your parents? Or do you still have your hands on someone's throat?

"So My heavenly Father also will do to you, if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive not his brother his trespasses" (verse 35).

Revenge is sweet for only a moment. An unforgiving spirit delivers people to the "torturers"! Jesus warns us that one of the worst tragedies that could happen to us is to refuse to forgive.

Let us throw off the shackles of hatred, grudges, malice and revenge, and be free. Let us receive mercy and allow it to operate in us.

12.

NO LOVE, NO LIFE

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And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested Him, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

He said to him, "What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?"

So he answered and said, "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind, and 'your neighbor as yourself.'*"

And He said to him, "You have answered rightly; do this and you will live."

But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

And Jesus answered and said, "A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.

"Now by chance a certain priest came down that road. And when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.

"Likewise a Levite, when he arrived at the place, came and looked, and passed by on the other side.

"But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion on him, and went to him, and bandaged his wounds, pouring in oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

"On the next day when he departed, he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said to him, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you.'

"So which of these three, do you think, was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?"

And he said, "He who showed mercy on him." Then said Jesus to him, "Go and do likewise."

-Luke 10:25-37

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"Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Having asked the question, the expert in the law of Moses stood there smugly, sure in himself that Jesus could not name even one religious duty that he and his colleagues in religion were not performing. The Galilean would have to admit that they were indeed righteous, and that would put to silence His judgments against them.

Jesus wisely replied with a question: "What is written in the law?" In other words, if you want the answers to the great questions of life, *go to the Bible*.

Surprisingly the lawyer gave the right answer: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus replied, "You have answered rightly; do this and you will live." That is, love and you will live.

The professional holy man was caught in his own trap. According to contemporary religious thinking, righteousness was a performance, not a condition of the heart. So all he had in mind was a catalog of duties, and he was confident that he was living up to the complete list.

But somehow the scorned Nazarene had reached past his tidy little ethical system and was pointing his finger at the hollow core of the man's character, exposing a heart void of love.

"But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" (verse 29).

Now he wants to play word games with the Bible. Wrong Biblical interpretation is often an attempt to make the word of God fit one's own ideas and thereby nullify its judgment on one's lifestyle. The rules are simple: If you do not like what the Bible says, explain it away. It is a popular game, but very deadly.

The gentleman got technical over the word, "neighbor." He was trying to justify himself by imprisoning the word within the boundaries selfish legalism had placed on it.

But Jesus refused to play the game. The Lord exposed the hypocrisy in what is known as the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The road from Jerusalem down to Jericho was dangerous. Robbers lurked in its lonely stretches. To make the journey alone was literally to take one's life in one's own hands.

One man did, and was way-laid. Stripped and wounded he lay unconscious and in danger of dying.

A priest came by. Many priests lived in Jericho in those days. They went up to Jerusalem whenever their turn came to serve in the temple.

A Levite also passed by. Possibly he, too, was on his way to or from his religious duties.

Both men saw the victim. Both men left him and went on their way. Possibly they had plausible excuses. It was risky to stop along that road. Delay was dangerous. The robbers might be lurking nearby, waiting to ambush anyone who stopped to help the man.

And who knows? He might be a decoy, faking injury to lure someone into a trap. Better not take any chances!

Or what if the man were dead? If they touched the body, they would be ceremonially unclean. They just could not risk that!

Anyway, it was his own fault, they might have reasoned. He knew the risks of traveling this road. He took the chance. Too bad!

Likely they had some feelings about what had happened. Indignation—why don't the Romans provide better protection! Pity—we surely do feel sorry for the poor fellow. Their emotions satisfied them.

Then along came a Samaritan, one of those despised half-breeds from the north. His conduct revealed the qualities of genuine love.

The lawyer could quote the verse. The Samaritan lived it. He showed love to be a rational decision to secure the highest good whenever need and opportunity were present, to anyone without prejudice, in spite of fear, and to follow through logically and responsibly even if it should mean personal cost.

The real question is not, "Who is my neighbor?" but, "To whom can I be a neighbor?" The lawyer's question condemned him.

Legalism looks for limits. Love looks for opportunities. Selfishness searches for every possible excuse. Love finds a way past all obstacles.

Now we must be careful not to make parables teach what Jesus did not teach. He did not teach that we can obtain salvation by our good works, by being a "Good Samaritan." Works done to gain merit are just as selfish and void of love as the religious works of the priest and the Levite.

Neither did the Lord teach that humaneness by itself is a substitute for true religion. A person who is saved will be a good Samaritan, but imitating the good Samaritan is not the way to be saved. Ephesians 2:8, 9 says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."

If God's love is in the heart, it will express itself in good works. But good works are

not proof of love. First Corinthians 13:3 tells us that it is possible to give all our goods to feed the poor, and yet not have love.

In this parable Jesus is making clear the nature of true righteousness. He is showing us that there is no true religion apart from true morality, and that there is no true morality without love. Without love there is no holiness.

Throughout the parable Jesus kept the lawyer's original question in focus. He had asked how to obtain eternal life. Eternal life is the gift of God received by faith. Saving faith involves opening the heart to the love of God. Without love there is no eternal life.

Jesus made it clear: "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

So let us ask ourselves, "Do I have the love of God? Do people know that I am a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ?"

All of us have opportunities to show the love of God. "Neighbors" are everywhere. "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Galatians 6:10).

13.

KEEP ON PRAYING

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Which of you shall have a friend, and go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me on his journey, and I have nothing to set before him"; and he will answer from within and say, "Do not trouble me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give to you?"

I say to you, though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will rise and give him as many as he needs.

-Luke 11:5-8

There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. Now there was a widow in that city and she came to him, saying, "Get justice for me from my adversary."

And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, "Though I do not fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me."

Then the Lord said, "Hear what the unjust judge said. And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?"

-Luke 18:2-8

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In a neighborhood where we lived a number of years ago there was a boy who delighted in ringing our doorbell just once and then running. By the time we opened the door, he was gone.

Probably you have answered the telephone after only the third or fourth ring to discover that the party just hung up. You got there just in time to hear a "click" and the dial tone. Aggravating, isn't it? You assume that it must not have been important, or else they would have kept on ringing.

Jesus taught much about prayer. One point about prayer is so important He gave two parables on it, both recorded in Luke. One is the parable of the Persistent Friend (Luke 11:1-13). The other is the parable of the Insistent Widow (Luke 18:1-8).

Although each parable has its own emphasis, both carry the same basic message: If

you have a petition, *keep on praying*. Don't give up.

Both focus on the character of God and both use a contrast to illuminate His character. God never sleeps, and He is always just.

First, we look at the scene in Luke eleven. It is the middle of the night. A traveler arrives at the house of a friend. Courtesy demands that the guest be fed, but the host is out of bread.

Where can he get bread this time of night? Oh, yes a friend down the street *always* has bread. So he goes to his door and knocks.

"Lend me three loaves," he asks. Sure enough, the friend has the loaves, but he refuses to disturb his children who are sleeping around him.

"Stop giving me trouble," he orders. But the man at the door refuses to leave.

"Look, friend; I need bread," he persists. "You have bread, and I'm not taking 'no' for an answer. If you don't wake up the kids, *I will*—and probably the whole neighborhood."

"Importunity" is what the King James Version calls it. It means being overly persistent, troublesomely urgent, and that without apology or a sense of shame. Today we call it just plain *gall*.

He got his loaves, not because of friendship but because of persistence.

And he got all three. He did not reduce the request to one or two. That would have made no difference, except to disgust the man of the house. If we are going to be persistent, let us go all the way. Settle for nothing less. Make waking up the children worthwhile!

Then Jesus said to the disciples, "And *I* say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; and he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks it will be opened" (Luke 11:9, 10).

God is *not* like the man in that house. Our Father never sleeps. He is always eager to give. So then, if sincere persistence will obtain what we need from a sleepy-eyed friend, how much more will our loving, generous Father in heaven give His children what they need? *How much more?* That is our Lord's question.

But He told us to ask; He told us to seek; He told us to knock.

Then Jesus approached the subject from another direction. He told about a mistreated widow who came to a corrupt judge for justice. She had no money for a bribe; neither did she have social or political leverage. Nevertheless, she cried, "Get justice for me from my adversary!"

The wicked judge figured if he just ignored her, she would go away and leave him alone. But he underestimated this woman. She had one weapon—insistence—and she aimed it at his desire for ease.

She kept coming back, allowing him no rest. At last he caved in. "This widow troubles me," he moaned, using the same boxing term that Paul did in 1 Corinthians 9:27. In other words, "I've had all I can take. If I don't help her, she will beat me down."

The widow got what she came for, and she did it by sheer insistence. She wanted justice, and she refused to be denied!

Here again we must remember that God is the very opposite of that unjust judge. In this parable, as in the former, Jesus used a sharp contrast to highlight the character of God.

To understand the parable of the Insistent Widow (also called the parable of the Unjust Judge), we must keep in mind that the Lord spoke it in reference to His second coming. "Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8). That is, will He find this kind of determined faith?

We believe we are living in the closing days of this age, and we expect Jesus to return soon. In these last days many believers are suffering persecution. Some languish in slave labor camps and prisons. Sin and injustice abound. It is easy for many people to question God, even to blame Him. "How long will God let this go on?" they ask. "When will He avenge His own of their adversaries?"

Jesus tells us to be patient. It is a necessity that we pray and not lose heart. We are told to "account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation" (2 Peter 3:15).

God is merciful and exercises amazing patience with the wicked, "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). But the day will come. The trumpet will sound, and our deliverance will come speedily!

So pray on, Christian friend. Do not give up. The righteous Judge is standing at the door (James 5:9).

14.

WHAT DO YOU SAY TO A STARVING SOUL?

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The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. And he thought within himself, saying, "What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?"

So he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink and be merry.'"

But God said to him, "You fool! This night your soul will be required of you: then whose will those things be which you have provided?"

So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.

-Luke 12:16-21

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Although Jesus talked about this man nearly two thousand years ago, in a real sense the gentleman is alive right now. As a hard-working man who knows what he is doing, he tends to his business and he makes it pay.

Financially and socially he is a big success. He plans to retire early and appears to be having a good time.

Jesus described him as a successful farmer: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully" (verse 16).

Now there is nothing wrong with that. Evidently the man gained his wealth legitimately. So far as we know he cheated nobody. No pay-offs. No shady deals. Just clean, hard work. His were honest, hard-earned dollars right out of "mother earth" that God had blessed with plenty of sunshine and rain.

Also, he was a thinking man, always planning things out well ahead. In itself that is a very good idea. But he made a very serious mistake. He thought only about his earthly life. His mind was a closed system. It had no room for eternal considerations. Such thinking can be very shrewd, but it is not reasonable. God created us in His image, moral beings with the capacity to think about eternal realities and values. When we fail to do so, we sin against God, suppress the highest qualities of our humanity, and do violence against our own intelligence.

Thoughts reveal our motives, our values, the person we know we really are.

God read the minds of the people in Noah's day and reported: "The thoughts of his heart ... only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5).

And what was this farmer thinking?

"What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops? ... I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods."

Now we are getting the picture. Notice how often he says "I" and "my"? "*My* barns, *my* crops, *my* goods."

Notice also how often he says "I will." He is self-centered and self-willed. Not once did he thank God for sunshine, rain, strength, and favorable farming conditions. Not once did he recognize that his plenty had come ultimately from his Creator. Not once did he acknowledge his responsibility to God, or ask Him how He wanted his life and resources managed. On the contrary, his devotion to himself was total and complete!

We find him and all who are like him described in Psalm 10:4: "The wicked in his proud countenance does not seek God; God is in none of his thoughts."

Selfishness ruled his thinking. No wonder the thoughts of the wicked are an abomination to the Lord (Proverbs 15:26). And so God commands: "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts..." (Isaiah 55:7).

Next we discover something remarkable about this devotee of material success and hedonistic pleasure. He starts talking to his soul!

At least he knew that he had a soul. This is the secular person's uncomfortable tension. To live as though one does not even have a soul forces a person to deny the core realities of one's own true humanity. It is spiritual suicide, the ultimate self-violation. Not much better off are the people who, like this man, recognize that they have a soul but understand nothing of its importance and its needs.

Listen to what he says: "Soul, you have much goods laid up for many years." Goods: houses, lands, stocks, bonds, food, cars, campers, boats, *things*.

"Look, soul," he says, "look at all the things I have accumulated for you." But down deep inside his soul is trying to get this message across to him: "Man, don't you know that I cannot live on *things*?"

"Many years," the man boasted. With the goals of a working lifetime within his reach, he assumed that he had a long retirement ahead, filled with self-indulgence. He forgot that for all mortals tomorrow is only an assumption.

"Take your ease." Why did he say that to his soul? Was his soul uneasy? It should be, the way it had been neglected, and in view of what lay ahead for it!

"Eat, drink, and be merry." Is that all he had worked for all those years? Is that life's

highest meaning and purpose? Is that the most there is to living? This poor rich man thought so. We pity him and all who are like him!

But God said to him, "You fool!" He had failed to consider what God thought of him, and probably did not care. Likely he had a good reputation among men, and that was enough for him.

Let us ask his neighbors. Their answer? "He's a good neighbor. Minds his own business. Doesn't give anybody any trouble. Willing to help out when you need him."

Next, we interview the president of the Chamber Of Commerce. His response? "A real community leader. Civic-minded. Head of the local farm organization. Successful, too. All the young farmers are following his example."

And the man who runs the feed store—what is his opinion? "He's the best customer I have. Honest. Always pays his account in full and on time. Highly thought of in these parts."

All of this sounds great. Now let us go to God and find out the truth about this man.

"*He is a fool,*" God declares.

"What? But look how rich and popular he is?"

"But look at how he is treating his soul."

"This night your soul shall be required of you." Tonight! Great plans for tomorrow's indulgences, with one foot in the grave. Only a few heartbeats left, and still the fool trifles! He has made no provision for his soul, and God is calling for it tonight. Madness!

His wrong was not that he was prosperous, but that he had left God out of his life. Prosperity is a blessing if the soul prospers (3 John 2). What is important is to be rich toward God, rich in eternal values.

This man had fed his body well, but down inside was a neglected, starved soul. His epitaph might well read, "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Mark 8:36, 37).

What do you say to a starving soul? How is that hidden hunger to be satisfied?

Feed it material possessions and passing pleasures, and you feed it sawdust. Feed it Eastern religious mysticism and subjective emotionalism, and you feed it foam.

What do you say to a starving soul? We hear the real answer from the Son of God as He speaks to the soul of modern man: "I am the bread of life: He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst" (John 6:35). "Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst" (John 4:14).

That's it! Only Jesus Christ can satisfy the hunger and the thirst of the human soul. Nothing else can.

Commit everything to Him now. *Everything*. Open your heart to Him. Trust Him as your Savior. Let Him come in and fill your life with His fullness.

15.

WHAT ON EARTH ARE YOU DOING FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE?

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A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came seeking fruit on it and found none.

Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, "Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?"

But he answered and said to him, "Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, then after that you can cut it down."

-Luke 13:6-9

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Jesus had been challenging His Judean audience with the moral obligations of true religion. He had even used the term "hypocrites" in addressing them.

All of this went directly against one of their deeply ingrained notions. They assumed that if God were displeased with them, He would have brought some evil event upon them. Things were going along fairly well; so they assumed God must be satisfied with them. After all, were they not the chosen people? So then, why all this talk about "hypocrites," and "why even of yourselves do you not judge what is right?" (Luke 12:57). Did Jesus really think they were sinners?

If Jesus wanted to find sinners, He should go to His own native Galilee. There Pilate had mingled the blood of some Galileans with their sacrifices. If those Galileans had not been sinners, that would not have happened to them!

Jesus aimed His reply directly at the heart of their false assumptions: "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:2, 3).

Then the Lord brought the whole matter home to Judea, right to the city of Jerusalem. "Or those eighteen, on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwell in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you shall all likewise perish" (verses 4 - 5).

Next, the Lord drove the point in all the way by the parable of the barren fig tree.

It was common practice in that country to plant fig trees in vineyards. So the people

could easily picture what Jesus described. A fig tree had been planted in a vineyard. For three years the current owner looked for fruit on it, and each time he was disappointed. So he issued the order to his vine-keeper: "Cut it down!"

The vine-keeper interceded, "Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, then after that you can cut it down."

The meaning of this parable is not hard to find. In Scripture Israel was likened to a fig tree and to a vineyard (for example, see Jeremiah 24 and Isaiah 5). The Jews knew this.

The owner of the field had a right to expect figs from a tree. He also had the right to uproot a fruitless tree. Just so, God the Father had a right to expect genuine righteousness from Israel, a nation that professed righteousness. He also had a right to uproot a fruitless nation. In other words, both the tree and the nation should produce what they profess. Both should be removed if they do not.

John the Baptist had already issued the divine warning: "And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matthew 3:10). Perhaps John's words surfaced in the memories of some of Jesus' hearers as the Lord spoke.

The fruitless tree rendered the ground it occupied useless. It consumed resources, required wasted care, and stood in the place that could be occupied by a fruitful tree.

For three years the Owner sought His rightful fruit (perhaps a reference to our Lord's earthly ministry), but Israel was not producing.

"Cut it down!" came the divine command. That generation was under the judgment of God for rejecting their Messiah and the moral obligations of His kingdom. Jesus made that fact clear to them.

But He was also their Intercessor, and His intercession alone spared them! But not indefinitely. *There would be no unlimited fruitlessness.*

Jesus would dig around the unfruitful tree, disturb it, probe it, attempt to open it up. He would pour in the life-giving nutrients of the gospel. He would do everything possible to make it fruitful. He would do so for a year—not necessarily a calendar year, but "the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:19). If the nation did not repent during that time, even the Intercessor agreed that it should be cut down. There is no disagreement between the Owner and the Intercessor. They are in perfect harmony both in mercy and in justice.

What did happen? The record of history is tragic. That generation did not repent, and so they likewise perished, their blood spilled by Roman swords and their bodies crushed under the stones of collapsing buildings as the legions of General Titus overcame Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

Christ's words are sure. They are engraved in Scripture as a divine warning to a fruitless world and to a fruitless life. It is aimed particularly at those who name the name of Christ.

A solemn responsibility rests upon all who call themselves Christians! Everyone—most of all God Himself—requires us to produce what we profess.

How should a Christian live? Just ask almost any unbeliever, and they will tell you. Read the Bible, and God will tell you.

God is asking us, "What are you producing in the space you are occupying?"

Unbelievers are producing nothing that is acceptable to God. They are under divine orders to repent and believe the gospel.

Hypocrites are unproductive, too. We who profess to be Christians would do well to ask ourselves, "Am I merely occupying space? Am I receiving spiritual care and consuming the resources of grace without producing the fruit of the Spirit in my life, the fruit of godliness in my conduct, or the fruit of service and ministry? *What on earth am I doing for Heaven's sake?*"

Let us not join the majority of this age in demanding, "What can I get out of life? What's in it for me?" Instead, with hearts that are regenerated and filled with the love of God, let us inquire diligently, "What can I put into life that will count for time and eternity?"

Let our pursuit be not the pursuit of happiness, but the pursuit of fruitfulness. Then happiness will surely follow. For if we try to save our lives, we shall surely lose them. But if we lose them for Christ's sake and the gospels, we shall surely find them.

Friend, how much time do you have left? None of us knows. "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2). Christ is interceding on our behalf. The Holy Spirit is inviting us. Let us be sure that we are abiding in Him; for if we are, we shall bring forth much fruit (John 15:5).

16.

COME TO THE FEAST

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A certain man gave a great supper and invited many, and sent his servant at supper time to say to those who were invited, "Come; for all things are now ready."

But they all with one accord began to make excuses. The first said to him, "I have bought a piece of ground, and I must go and see it. I ask you to have me excused." And another said, "I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to test them. I ask you to have me excused." Still another said, "I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come."

So that servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house, being angry, said to his servant, "Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in here the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind."

And the servant said, "Master, it is done as you commanded, and still there is room."

Then the master said to the servant, "Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. For I say to you that none of those men who were invited shall taste my supper."

-Luke 14:16-24

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Almost everyone regards a dinner invitation as a gesture of real friendship, an honor to receive and a pleasure to accept. Most of us enjoy good food and pleasant table company.

That is why the behavior of the men Jesus talked about in this parable seems so strange and unreasonable.

It seems strange that apparently sane people would decline an invitation to a delightful evening of delicious food and pleasant companionship sponsored at great effort and expense by a generous host. But the excuses they offered were stranger still!

The first claimed that he could not come because he had just bought a piece of ground and had to look at it. That was nonsense, of course, and he must have known it. People look at their property *before* they buy it. Anyway, he could have viewed it later. The property would still be there.

This man represents the people who refuse the invitation to the Kingdom of God because they are all wrapped up in their possessions. Their possessions possess them.

The second man's excuse was that he had just bought five yoke of oxen and he had to try them out.

More nonsense! Any man not smart enough to try out the oxen before he bought them probably did not own enough ground to require five yoke of oxen to plow it.

He represents those who are too busy with personal projects to accept eternal life. They are like a child who is too absorbed with TV to come to dinner. Such behavior may be understandable in children, but not in adults when eternal values are at stake.

The third man claimed he had married a wife and therefore could not come. Well, the poor fellow! Just married and hen-pecked already? Of course, it was just a flimsy excuse. Why not bring the bride along? Make the great supper part of the honeymoon. That would be a good way to start married life.

He represents the people who allow other people to stand between them and the blessing of God. People are their excuse. If we allow people to keep us from living for God, they will.

So we have the excuses: possessions, projects, people. The devil is well supplied with stumbling-blocks. If we will allow anything to come between us and God, the enemy of our souls "has it in stock," and he knows just how and when to place it in front of us.

If we are going to enter the kingdom of God, we must determine once and for all that we will not allow anything or anyone to stand in our way. God will back up that kind of commitment with the full resources of His all-sufficient grace!

These people had showed interest in attending the feast when the preliminary contact was made (such contacts were customary); but when the moment arrived to *do* something about it, they were unwilling to make the effort. Such callous disregard for the feelings of the generous host! Such insult to him after he had prepared so much for them!

This is the callous way millions of people treat God and *His* gracious invitation. They just cannot be bothered! Oh, they think and talk about Heaven, all right, but when it comes to *doing* something about it, they are not willing even to accept a free invitation. They are guilty of unreasonable disregard for real values.

Certainly, "the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not" (2 Corinthians 4:4 KJV).

But Heaven is not going to be empty. God did not prepare the everlasting joys of Paradise at the tremendous cost of the death of His Son to have it all go for nothing.

Jesus made that clear in the second part of the parable. The host sent his servant into the streets to bring in the poor, the maimed, the halt, and the blind. When every seat was filled, the feast began.

Jesus came to His own, and they rejected Him (John 1:11). Now the command is "Go into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15).

"Bring them in," Jesus orders. All are invited. All are welcome to sit down and enjoy the everlasting feast of God's mercy and love.

And here they come: publicans and sinners, rich and poor, spiritually hungry souls "of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues." (Revelation 7:9).

They marvel that such a feast has been prepared for them. Yet they do believe. Leaving their sins and the rags of their spiritual poverty, they come with "everlasting joy" (Isaiah 51:11), to "sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 8:11).

"And still there is room." Room for you. Leave the moldy crusts of selfishness. The Master has prepared an everlasting feast for you, and you may enjoy it both now and forever in His presence absolutely free as His invited guest.

To turn down such a gracious offer would be most unreasonable. It would be utter folly.

You have received the priceless invitation. Jesus urges you to accept it, to accept Him. He is waiting for your decision. Come to Him now and tell Him that you accept with deepest gratitude.

THE LOST SHEEP

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What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which 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 neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost!"

I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance.

-Luke 15:4-7

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One of Jesus' most beautiful parables portrays the concern of a shepherd over one wayward sheep.

Never having been a sheep, none of us can say for sure just what fancies stimulated that one sheep to leave the flock and strike out on its own. But we have seen people behave like the wooly rebel in the parable. So perhaps the impulses are similar.

Like its human counterpart, perhaps the sheep looked over the fence at what seemed to be greener pastures.

"There's a world of exciting experiences out there, and here I am, stuck with ninety-nine boring duds. We go only where the shepherd leads us, eat only what he feeds us, and do only what he says.

"Follow here'. 'Don't go there!' 'Come!' 'Go!' 'Wait'. 'Rest'. I've had it with taking orders. These conformists can stay in their rut if they want to. Me? I'm born free. I don't need anybody to tell me what to do, and I don't want any responsibilities to tie me down.

"I've been repressed by the reactionary rules of the shepherd long enough. It's time I discovered life for myself. I'm going to do my own thing. I'm going to be free!"

So as the flock headed home, our independent-minded friend began drifting toward the rear. When they rounded the next bend, his chance would come! Tailing along behind, he let the rest of the flock turn and disappear from sight.

This was it! With a bound he left the trail and was gone, his heart beating wildly with excitement.

Over the foothills he scampered, climbing higher and higher. What a view! He saw things he had never seen before.

He paused only a moment, because the strange new thrills that rippled through his little spirit drove him on.

So this is freedom, he thought. What a heady experience!

Once ignited, his reservoir of volatile impulses quickly exploded. But once the initial eruption was over, the anti-climax set in.

"That's over; so what's next? More, more, I want more!"

Meanwhile, our self-seeking friend had been too busy to notice his own lengthening shadow. The sun disappeared behind the hills. Clouds gathered. The sharp air stung his nostrils.

Suddenly he sensed something else he had never experienced before. He could not define it, but he felt the sharp torment of it. We human beings call it *fear*.

Satiated desires suddenly lost their attraction. Once they had appealed to him as liberators, but now they mocked him as masters that had betrayed him.

Darkness drew its shroud around him. Howling wolves taunted him. Thunder crashed over his head. Fleeting fingers of lightning reached out for him from a dozen directions as icy blasts of wind drove sharp pellets of sleet against his shivering flesh. Cocky self-confidence surrendered to despair.

What he had dreamed would be an exercise of freedom turned out to be a nightmare—an aimless, senseless, irresponsible plunge into confusion and loss. He had started out with no real sense of direction, and now he had arrived at where he was going—nowhere. He was alone, completely lost, and his bleating cries were being carried away by the laughing wind.

Just so it is with people who wander through life without Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd. They are lost—lost to the cause of Christ here on earth, lost to the great opportunities for service in the kingdom of God, lost to God forever, lost to the eternal blessings that would have been theirs to enjoy had they obeyed, lost souls in eternal darkness!

For one person who is without Christ forever, all the combined misery and woe of all time cannot begin to equal the tragedy of that one word—*lost!*

It is no wonder Jesus said, "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Mark 8:36, 37).

Meanwhile, as dusk painted subdued tones on the landscape, the flock in the valley prepared for the night. Safe inside the sheep-fold, they were content. Everything good was theirs, for they had stayed close to the shepherd.

But the shepherd was troubled, deeply troubled. He counted his sheep once; then twice. There were only ninety-nine. One was missing! Out there in the darkness and danger, one sheep was stumbling in confusion.

So, leaving the comfort and safety of the fold, the shepherd committed himself to the dangerous rescue operation.

Into the mountains he went, wind and rain lashing his flesh, branches tearing at him, wild animals snarling nearby.

On he stumbled, all the while calling to his sheep. Oh, what the shepherd had to suffer because of the foolish disobedience of one sheep!

So it was with Jesus. Our rebellion cost Him everything, including His life! "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep," He said (John 10:11). The prophet had foretold it: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6).

All at once the shepherd heard a faint, pitiful cry. With quickened step he pressed on toward the advancing sound.

Then he found it! Caught and held fast in a thicket, the exhausted, trembling sheep had come to the end of its wanderings. Gone were the rebellious impulses. Gone was the ambition to live its own life to please itself. It was back in the arms of the shepherd, and that was all that mattered.

One night many years ago at the close of D. L. Moody's sermon on the lost sheep, Ira Sankey sat down at his organ and began to sing a poem he had recently found, written by Elizabeth C. Clephane. Publicly composing the music as he went along, he sang:

"There were ninety and nine that safely lay
In the shelter of the fold,
But one was out on the hills away,
Far off from the gates of gold:
Away on the mountains wild and bare,
Away from the tender Shepherd's care.

"'Lord, Thou hast here Thy ninety and nine;
Are they not enough for Thee?'
But the Shepherd made answer:
'This of mine has wandered away from Me;
And although the road be rough and steep,
I go to the desert to find my sheep'.

"But none of the ransomed ever knew
How deep were the waters crossed;
Or how dark was the night that the Lord passed through
Ere He found His sheep that was lost.
Out in the desert He heard its cry—
Sick and helpless, and ready to die.

"Lord, whence are those blood-drops all the way
That mark out the mountain's track?'
'They were shed for one who had gone astray
Ere the Shepherd could bring him back'.
'Lord whence are Thy hands so rent and torn?'
'They are pierced tonight by many a thorn'.

"But all through the mountains, thunder-riven,
And up from the rocky steep,
There arose a cry to the gate of heaven,
'Rejoice! I have found my sheep!'
And the angels echoed around the throne,
'Rejoice, for the Lord brings back His own!'"

As the song ended, the congregation was hushed. Tears flowed, and wandering sheep surrendered to the Good Shepherd.

Jesus said, "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). Surrender to Him now. He will save you and give you true freedom.

18.

LOST IN THE HOUSE

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What woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and seek diligently until she finds it?

And when she has found it, she calls her friends and neighbors together, saying, "Rejoice with me; for I found the piece which I lost!"

Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

-Luke 15:8-10

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As I begin to write, I am holding in my hand a brass token that came into my possession a few weeks ago. On one side is the image of an eagle. On the reverse side are the words, "no cash value."

As I pondered those words, I thought how the world as a whole places little or no value on the individual. Bombs explode, killing and maiming. Guns blaze, and children scream and bleed. It is as though "no cash value" were written across their foreheads.

God also looks at each one and He, too, affirms (but in a totally different sense), "no cash value." That is, no amount of money can possibly measure the worth of one human being.

This parable of Jesus is one of three recorded in Luke, chapter fifteen. All three are on the same subject: the priceless value of each individual soul.

The three parables differ, though, in emphasis. In the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, it is the Savior Who does the seeking. In the parable of the prodigal son, it is the lost son who seeks to be restored.

The sheep was lost through its own stupidity and impulsiveness. The coin was lost through the carelessness and neglect of another. The son was lost because of his willfulness. The sheep was lost abroad. The coin was lost at home. The sheep depicts man's loss to himself as well as to God. The coin focuses on the loss to God.

"I have found my sheep which was lost" (verse six). "I have found the piece which I had lost" (verse nine). Notice the difference.

In the parable of the lost coin, Jesus described a calamity. He did this for a reason: to show in terms of an earthly value how real and urgent are spiritual values. He made

a parallel between how people feel about natural treasures and how God feels (and we ought to feel) about spiritual ones.

A Palestinian woman had ten silver *drachmae*. The *drachma* did not have a large monetary value in modern terms. But those ten pieces of silver could have been her life savings. They could have been even the coins of her dowry, worn on the front of her headgear. That would make the situation similar to the crisis of losing one's engagement or wedding ring.

Somehow she had lost one of her precious coins. This was such a crisis that the women who were her friends learned of it and became concerned. Her later invitation, "rejoice with me," would have seemed strange had she not informed them when the coin was lost.

That might even have been part of her search. The coin is lost! Where to go? Where to search? Let's see. Yesterday she was next-door visiting her neighbor.

"Did you notice any coins missing from my dowry?"

"No.

What about the lady across the street? She had stopped by there, too.

"Were all the coins in place?"

"Yes."

Carefully planned research is the only way to find that missing coin!

The house is the only place left. Every other possibility has been ruled out by the process of elimination. *The lost coin must be in this house*. Now that you know where to look, lady, *go at it*.

In those days the houses of the common people were simple, dimly-lit dwellings with dirt floors. The woman knew that the coin was in that house. So she lit a candle, turned everything upside down, grabbed a broom and made the dust fly.

She knew where to look, what tools to use and how to use them; and she had the determination to stay with the job until she recovered that coin. When she found it, she shared her joy with the whole neighborhood!

In this parable Jesus used a well-understood natural anxiety to demonstrate a far greater (but not so well-understood) spiritual anxiety.

Christ is emphasizing the worth of the individual. People are not cheap in God's sight!

The destructive forces of selfishness—greed, global power politics, exploitation, war, revolution, violence—roll over the poor masses like a phalanx of crushing juggernauts. In some parts of the world thousands die in natural disasters with barely a passing

notice in the media. People sacrifice people in their struggle to gain their own ends, and (as Buttrick so aptly put it) "the human coin rolls into a dark corner."

Even when voices are raised and movements get under way for reform, often they are so concerned about "the people" they ignore the person.

"The people are what matter!" cries the revolutionary. "The *person* is what matters," replies the Master. For if the person is nothing, so are the people. A billion zeros add up to zero. The people are priceless because the person is.

Jesus made it clear: God is vitally concerned about what happens to each and every person. It was the *one* lost sheep, the *one* lost coin, the *one* lost son, that moved Heaven and earth. Each person is a whole world of eternal value. As someone has pointed out, *the image of a King is stamped on that coin!*

Only God realizes fully how great is the loss of *one*. A life of service and blessing—*lost*. An eternity of praise and glory to God—*lost*. Fellowship with God—*lost*. Heaven, earth, everybody loses forever when one soul is lost.

"The Son of man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10).

He has made every believer a partner with Him in the great evangelistic search. So let's get with it. Rearrange whatever needs rearranging. Disturb the sluggish, ineffective *status quo* if need be. Raise the dust!

The coin was lost *in the house*. That is exactly where many precious souls are lost. We dare not assume that just because our children are not in trouble they are therefore in the kingdom. Though raised in church, if they do not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, they are lost.

Is there a lost coin in your house? If so, perhaps the first thing to do is *clean house*. As the head of your home renew your commitment to Christ and His kingdom. Get rid of whatever it is that coin is hiding behind! Set your home in order and do it in love. Get yourselves and your family under control.

Walk in the Spirit. Establish a biblical lifestyle. Let the principles of the kingdom rule. Discipline attitudes and emotions.

The government of the home extends to every member of the family and every room in the house.

Together as a family, set sensible guidelines for the radio, the T. V., the computer. Build the family budget on the sound principles of Christian stewardship, including tithing. Examine the reading material in the home. Are there items to be eliminated, subscriptions to be canceled, or perhaps good ones to start?

Are there ashtrays that need to be emptied and put away? Is there something in the refrigerator that should be poured down the sink?

Establish a pattern of faithfulness to the church. Let everyone know what the priorities are. Build a family altar.

Leave no dark corner anywhere for that coin to hide in!

Again, be sure to do it all in love. Even then, you are bound to raise some dust! But stick with it. Do not give in or give up. Remember, no seeking, no rejoicing. The time of rejoicing will come when you recover that priceless coin. Then the angels will join in the glad celebration.

REBELLION, RUIN, AND RESTORATION

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A certain man had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, "Father give me the portion of goods that falls to me." So he divided to them his livelihood.

And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living.

But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want.

Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.

And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no man gave him anything to eat.

But when he came to himself, he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.'"

And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck, and kissed him.

And the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son."

But the father said to his servants, "Bring out the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And bring the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found." And they began to be merry.

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

And he said to him, your brother has come; and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf."

But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and

pleaded with him. So he answered and said to his father, "Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you have killed the fatted calf for him."

And he said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost, and is found."

-Luke 15:11-32

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This is a story of love, of conflict, of deep heartbreak, and of ecstatic joy. It is a story old and yet so new it might be happening in your family right now.

This has been called the most beautiful of our Lord's parables. Perhaps it is more than a parable, because the Master said, "a certain man had two sons..." Perhaps Jesus had personal knowledge of the family.

The scene opens on a well-to-do Jewish family. It appears that the two sons had been raised in affluence. If so, their lives had been quite comfortable and sheltered. High moral standards prevailed in the home.

But in the heart of the younger son a self-indulgent attitude had spawned a spirit of rebellion. The solid ethical structure of the home did not provide the fuel to feed the fires of youthful passion that raged within him.

So with the immaturity of a spoiled brat he demanded impudently of his gracious father, "Give me the portion of goods that falls to me."

"Give me." There is where the problems start. That is the beginning of trouble, the first step on a long trail of rebellion, heartache and tears.

Jesus does not tell us about the sweet reasonings of the distraught father, or the tears of the broken-hearted mother. The Savior assumed that we would know about such things.

But reason is wasted on the closed ears of him whose heart is ruled by mindless passion. They might as well talk to a brick wall as to a fool. His lusts overpowered his senses and alienated his heart from his intelligence.

The desire to go had mastered him. He could not wait for his father to die to get his portion of the goods.

The early inheritance that he got on demand burned holes in his pockets. His world was out there just waiting for him, and all he could think of was "Go, man, go!" He

imagined that he was breaking loose into freedom, totally unaware that he was the abject slave of his own lusts.

Soon he was on his way, headed for a place as far away as he could get from responsibility, restraints, righteousness, and reason. Where he was going, the people were liberated! None of this religious stuff, man. They knew how to live! When he arrived, he started wasting.

But, like so many people who live on instant gratification, it never dawned on him that eventually he would run out of money. The furnace of passion runs hot, and the fuel bills are high!

Notice now the faithful providence of God. "But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land; and he began to be in want" (verse 14).

Just as his funds ended, the famine began. Coincidence? No. *Divine mercy*. The headstrong youth was on a collision course with disaster, and God was placing roadblocks in front of him.

Now where were his new "friends"? Where were the fawning women and back-slapping "good buddies"? They were gone. "Happy Hour" was over. The selfish crowd had sucked him dry and thrown him away like an empty Dixie cup and a used paper napkin.

He began to taste real poverty. He had yearned for new experiences, and now he was getting them.

So he got a job feeding pigs. The road of self-will did not lead to high adventure. It ended instead smack in the middle of a pigpen. For a Jew, that was the lowest a person could go. Rebellion had indeed led to ruin.

Moreover, he was still hungry. Things are bad enough when a man has to work full time just for his own room and board. But during this famine labor was so cheap that an employer could hire a person full time just for a place to stay. No food. If he died of hunger, the boss could easily replace him. Nice, liberated, secular society! Real fun people!

We do not know who this employer was. He might have been a local merchant who had treated his new customer like a king when he had money to burn. Or he might have been the prodigal's favorite bartender ("Set 'em up boys. The good old boy from Judea is buying!"). Whoever he was, he represents the ungodly world, where it is "dog-eat-dog" when things get tough and the "bottom line" is "every man for himself."

Our young friend had to carry the carob pods out to the pigs, and no one would let him even dine with the swine.

"Don't eat any of that! It's for the pigs!" Imagine what *that* does to one's self-image!

We assume that his father did not know where his wayward son was. But if he did, he did the wise thing. The natural parental impulse would be to send some money and bail the poor boy out. But wise parents know it is folly to finance rebellion. The prodigal has to come to the end of himself. He has to get sick and tired of sin. His "fantasy island" has to sink away beneath his feet. He has to face reality.

So ruin led to realization. He "came to himself." It was about time! When he ran from home, he ran also from reason. Lusts "war against the soul" (1 Peter 2:11), pitting passion against intelligence for control of the will. When passion is given the victory, reason is vanquished. The integrity of the personality is violated, resulting in guilt, conflict, and disintegration.

But reality is stubborn. Starvation drove him to his senses. It became impossible to deny the pangs.

"I'm dying with hunger!" he exclaimed. What an astute observation! Finally, wisdom is born. Welcome back to reality, friend.

Yes, the pigpen is an effective educator. Some people learn lessons there they seem to miss elsewhere.

Realization led immediately to repentance. "I will arise and go to my father." He knew the road home and he was determined to walk every step of it, even if it killed him. There was nothing wrong with his will. It was just as strong as ever. But now, thank God, it was set in the right direction.

"Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before you." Now *that* is real godly sorrow. He recognized the levels of moral accountability. He was not acting out of self-pity. He knew he had to get right, and that always means getting right with God first. The restoration of relationships begins at the top!

"I am no longer worthy to be called your son." No excuses. No self-justification. Just honest, humble confession.

"And he arose, and came to his father." He did more than talk about it. He did it. He got up and got out of there. Usually that is the hard part. The devil builds up mental blocks: What if I can't make it? What if God doesn't want me?"

The difficulties loomed larger with each step nearer home. He kept rehearsing his speech over and over in his mind.

Meanwhile, back home a heavy-hearted man gazed intently down a dusty, old road. It had been a long time since the day he sadly watched his son disappear down that lane. Since then many hours had been spent in earnest watching. Would God answer his prayers? Would he ever see his son coming up that same road?

It seemed like just another day of waiting, looking, and hoping.

But what is this? A familiar figure trudged wearily toward him. There is no mistaking that form. It is his son! The long-awaited day has come!

Quickly the father arose and ran toward the far-off figure. With tears streaming down his face, he embraced his son and planted kiss after kiss on the gaunt face. Repentance brought restoration.

The young man blurted out his memorized speech, but the father gave him no room to finish. He was busy giving orders to prepare for the celebration. Restoration resulted in rejoicing!

Now, what is God saying to us? To every godly, praying parent who carries this deep sorrow God is saying, "Keep the fatted calf ready. The prodigals are coming home. When they arrive, receive them with open arms, kisses, and tears of joy."

If you are the Prodigal, God is saying to you "I love you. I will do everything wisely possible to keep you from destroying yourself. *I want you back*. Do not allow what an older brother might say keep you away from Father's house. My heart is open to you. Come home now."

The celebration is ready to start. We are just waiting for you. So come now and let the joy begin.

20.

THE CROOKED MANAGER

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There was a certain rich man who had a steward; and an accusation was brought against him that this man was wasting his goods.

So he called him and said to him, "What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your stewardship, for you can longer be steward."

Then the steward said within himself, "What shall I do? For my master is taking the stewardship away from me. I cannot dig; I am ashamed to beg; I have resolved what to do, that when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses."

So he called every one of his master's debtors to him, and said to the first, "How much do you owe my master?" And he said, "A hundred measures of oil." So he said unto him, "Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty."

Then he said to another, "And how much do you owe?" So he said, "A hundred measures of wheat." And he said unto him, "Take your bill, and write eighty."

So the master commended the unjust steward because he had dealt shrewdly. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light.

-Luke 16:1-8

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Jesus set a very interesting scenario before us in the parable of the unjust steward (Luke 16:1-8), and then followed it up with some pertinent principles.

A rich man hired a steward to manage his assets. Things seemed to go all right for a while. Then one day the owner began hearing some accusations against the manager. So he called him in and promptly took him to task.

"What's behind these reports?" he demanded. "Bring your records up to date. I want a full account of everything you've been doing. And as soon as you get things in order and the report is in my hands, I'm terminating you!"

Shaken, the manager thought anxiously, "I'm losing my job! What am I going to do? I'm not physically able to do pick and shovel work. And I'm ashamed to beg."

"I've got it!" he exclaimed. "I'll get in good with my lord's debtors so they'll take me

in. I know how much they owe. What is written on the papers is between them and me. I'll do some negotiating."

So right away he called an emergency meeting of the debtors. He had to work fast and he had to come on strong to pull off this scheme.

"How much do you owe my employer?" he demanded of the first.

"Why, a hundred measures of oil," he replied, a little puzzled.

"Right! Take your voucher and sit down quickly and change the amount to fifty," the rascal urged. The debtor found himself going along with the scheme.

Keeping up his pushy approach, the manager turned to another. "And how much do you owe?" he questioned. "A hundred measures of wheat," was the reply.

"Right! Take your voucher and change the amount to eighty," the manager directed.

Taking advantage of their greed, he maneuvered his employer's debtors until he had them right where he wanted them. None of them dared to "blow the whistle" on him because now they were all implicated.

The trick worked. Now they owed him a favor, and also he could blackmail them. He had "taken them in," and now they would be obliged to take him in!

When the rich man found out how his steward had managed to cheat him one last time, he gave him credit at least for his shrewdness. "I'll have to hand it to him. When it comes to crookedness, he certainly is an expert."

Now, Jesus did not approve of what the rascal did. He did not endorse the use of dishonest means to achieve good ends. And He certainly did not teach that we can buy our way into Heaven by giving to the poor.

The Master used this unusual and interesting parable to drive home four lessons.

1. *"The sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light"* (verse 8).

If believers are the children of light, the children of this world are the children of darkness. Blinded by "the god of this world," they see and value only the things of this world.

But we who believe are the children of light. We see true values—real, eternal, spiritual values—and these are primary to us. We regard temporal values only as secondary.

But what we regard as secondary, the children of this world value as primary. Having put priority on this present world, they pursue it with all their heart. They live for

it, concentrate their attention on it, invest all in it, give the energies of mind and body fully to it, and find in it their reason and reward for living. It is their life.

This does not mean that Christians should be half-hearted and mediocre in their earthly responsibilities. On the contrary, our stewardship to the Lord and to others requires us to do and be our best at whatever we do.

The point is that the children of this world and the children of light view the world differently. They live *for* this world; we live *in* it. They regard themselves as owners; we regard ourselves as stewards.

Again, they regard this world as primary; we regard it as secondary. The children of this world conduct themselves by a different set of rules, and we must not try to operate by the world's standards. We must not try to outsmart the children of darkness at their own game. The light does not permit us to do so!

Jesus said, "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves" (Matthew 10:16).

2. *"Make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home"* (verse 9).

That is, use money and property for the good of others. Invest in their temporal and eternal welfare. You will gain their everlasting gratitude. Then when you "fail," or your work on earth is finished, what a reception you will have in Heaven from those who were blessed by your investment!

Jesus reminds us that earthly resources will eventually run out; so let us use the temporal to secure results that will endure.

3. *"He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much"* (verse 10).

Integrity knows no dollar sign. How we handle our money and our possessions is a test of our character. It reveals whether or not we are morally qualified to receive the true riches. For example, who would trust a ministry to someone who cannot be trusted with finances?

The story is told of two men who were conversing about ethics. One asked the other, "Would you keep a dollar that a store clerk gave you by mistake?"

His friend thought for a moment, and then replied, "Probably."

The first man promptly followed-up with another question: "Would you steal a million dollars?"

The second man retorted indignantly, "What do you think I am? A thief?" The other replied, "That has already been established."

Jesus said, "Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?" (verse 11).

True riches. What a great subject! Here again we have an implied contrast. If spiritual and human values are the true riches, what are mere material values? They are not truly "riches."

Here is another contrast between the children of this world and the children of light. They view material objects as riches to be owned: we view them as resources to be invested for their rightful Owner. To us, "riches" means something far more valuable than "things."

Jesus asked, "And if you have not been faithful in what is another man's, who will give you what is your own?" (verse 12). How we treat what belongs to another is a test of our fitness to be entrusted with our own. How do we treat others' possessions, their name, their time, their ministry, their feelings, their family? The answer will reveal our fitness for possessing our own.

4. *"No servant can serve two masters ... You cannot serve God and mammon"* (verse 13).

Properly used, money is a friend. But when money becomes our master, it becomes an enemy. No amount of religious talk can compensate for covetous living.

"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also," Jesus said (Luke 12:34).

Paul admonished Timothy: "Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life." (1 Timothy 6:17-19).

Let us take inventory of the resources placed in our charge: time, talents, opportunities, health, intelligence, education, and other advantages. Then let us use them wisely, making them count for the highest good for both time and eternity.

G. Cambell Morgan told about a boy who was listening as his father prayed for missions and other Christian enterprises. When his father finished, the boy expressed his admiration for the noble prayer. Then he said, "But father, if I had your bankbook, I could answer half of your prayers."

With the Lord's help and guidance, let us be faithful managers of the blessings He has given us.

21.

THE GREAT REVERSAL

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There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day.

But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.

So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.

Then he cried and said, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame."

But Abraham said, "Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted, and you are tormented. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us."

Then he said, "I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment."

Abraham said to him, "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them."

And he said, "No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent."

But he said to him, "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead."

-Luke 16:19-31

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Classifying the story of the rich man and Lazarus as a parable does not remove it from historical reality. Jesus said: "There was a certain rich man ... There was a certain beggar named Lazarus..." So we could call this a historical parable.

The rich man is not named, but the beggar is. This led Augustine to suggest that Jesus was reviewing the Book of Life, where He found the name of Lazarus but not that of the rich man.

Jesus had just told his disciples to use money to benefit people, and so enjoy a glad reception into "the everlasting habitations." The Pharisees ridiculed the idea. Why should they "waste" God's blessings on people apparently "unworthy" of His blessings? Prosperity was proof of God's approval; so they were quite confident about their future after death.

Jesus cut the ground out from under them in this parable.

The rich man was clothed elegantly and "fared sumptuously every day." By contrast, Lazarus was laid ("cast") at the rich man's gate, hungry and full of ulcerated sores.

In those days, it is said, the very rich during their lavish feasting used chunks of bread to wipe their fingers. It could be that these discarded bits of bread were what Lazarus sought for to ease his hunger pangs.

In time Lazarus died, his death probably hastened by the neglect he suffered. Very likely there was no funeral, and his body was callously carted off to the Valley of Hinnom to be burned on the rubbish heap.

The rich man died also. The extra food that he consumed could have fed Lazarus. Instead, his gluttony might have hastened his own death. So both men suffered from the unfair distribution of food, though in different ways.

The rich man got a fine funeral. He went from a sumptuous table to a splendid tomb.

The bodies of both men lay still in death. Death is a social leveler.

At this point Jesus shocked His hearers by pulling back the mysterious veil, allowing them to see the awesome drama being acted out just beyond. What they saw was the great reversal.

First, a procession of angels escorted Lazarus to Paradise. Before the resurrection of Christ, all departed dead went into Sheol (Hades), a two-compartment realm. The righteous went to Paradise and the wicked to the place of torment. Paradise is now in Heaven because Jesus "led captivity captive" (see Ephesians 4:8). Hades is now exclusively a place of torment.

To make the scene even more pointed to His hearers, the Master used rabbinic terms (without necessarily endorsing rabbinic ideas). Lazarus was seen reclining in "Abraham's bosom," as at a feast. He who had been ignored by someone who called himself a son of Abraham now enjoyed the patriarch's embrace! That must have stung

the self-righteous Pharisees.

And where was the former rich man? "And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes." (verse 23).

But why? What crime did he commit? What were the charges against him? No doubt his behavior had been quite acceptable in the culture of his day. Why did he go to hell?

The moral government of God had one all-encompassing and soul-condemning charge against him—*selfishness*. He did not have the love of God in his heart.

Lazarus was the proof of it. Common mongrel dogs behaved better than this hypocrite. He ignored Lazarus, considering him to be of no concern to him. He callously accepted the social system with its classes. Lazarus was just another beggar, doing and being what beggars were supposed to do and be. He was in his "proper place," just part of the scenery.

We pause to look at some of the startling facts that Jesus revealed in this parable about what lies beyond death. Remember, parables are concrete facts that our Lord used to communicate spiritual truth.

Jesus showed us that the real person leaves the body at death, with practically no time lapse between death and destination. Also, personal identity, memory, and sensation continue after death, without the necessity of a physical body.

He revealed that there are two opposite destinies, one of extreme happiness and the other of extreme misery. Both are final and are determined according to choices made in this life.

The rich man begged for relief at the hand of Lazarus. Now the rich man begged as Lazarus had never begged, and Lazarus feasted as the rich man had never feasted!

We observe that the human mind in the torments of hell is both irrational and yet reflective. Though in eternity, he attempted to recapture time, thus thinking in linear sequence. He wanted a drop of water, in spite of the fact that such a passing physical palliative would be totally ineffective in the eternal fire.

On the other hand, he carried on a rational conversation concerning his five brothers. He knew they were lost because he knew they were of the same moral character as himself.

He pleaded desperately on behalf of his five brothers, but in vain. Abraham was firm: "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them" (verse 29).

But the tormented soul persisted: "No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent" (v. 30).

Abraham settled the matter with a great moral dictum: "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead" (verse 31). The neglect of available knowledge does not exempt us from moral responsibility. Scripture alone is sufficient light, and it is sheer folly to disregard it.

Consider the lessons that come to us out of this parable. One is that God permits injustices in this life. Lazarus was victimized, and God forced no one to do anything about it. God is not running this present world as a moral police state. The Bible tells us how to live and it reveals the consequences of disobedience. The rest is up to us.

Perhaps the main lesson of this parable is that supreme self-love is total moral depravity. That is, it is the sum of sin. Making self-gratification one's supreme goal does not merely lead to sin: it *is* sin. It is the totally "pro-me" commitment that is hostile to God and the highest good. For that reason it stands under the complete condemnation of a good and holy God.

A selfish heart is totally inconsistent with true religion. It is impossible to love God while self rules the heart and life. The commitment to self-gratification renders all outward forms of religion and morality meaningless.

Another truth follows. If God's love rules the heart, it will energize the life. Love will put us into action where action is possible and practical to meet perceived need. We will not content ourselves with mere words, sentiments, and a few leftovers.

Christian, *who is that at your gate?*

We see also an evangelistic fact. Another man named Lazarus *was* raised from the dead (see John, chapter 11), and people who were like the rich man's five brothers tried to kill him. Jesus Himself rose from the dead, and most did not believe.

If people do not change their hearts with a Bible within their reach and a Lazarus lying at their door, a messenger from the dead will not convert them!

People must believe the word of God from the heart to be saved. Miracles confirm the divine authority of Scripture and thus reinforce the appeal of the gospel to the reason. But if miracles do not result in repentance and faith, they have only provided entertainment to the observer.

Another strong message is that our choices here determine the kind of eternity we will have. It has been put this way: "Where we go hereafter depends on what we go after here." Where we will arrive depends on what road we travel. We get what we choose, what we live for. We are shaping our moral character to fit one of two places.

Jesus did not teach that we can merit Paradise by good works. *Never!* A person might feed and clothe every Lazarus in the world, and still not experience the change of heart that is involved in true saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Nevertheless, true saving faith changes the heart and also the life. We are saved by

grace alone; and grace alone *really* saves. Jesus Christ breaks the hold of self-gratification and sets the heart free to love in deed and in truth. This is the great moral reversal called the new birth!

Have you experienced it?

22.

A TALE OF TWO SINNERS

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Two men went up to the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, "God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess."

And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise 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, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

-Luke 18:10-14

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Our Lord describes two men who went into the temple to pray. But the main subject of this parable is not prayer. It is being right with God. This is one of Christ's clearest messages on justification by faith.

These two men had many things in common. Both were Jews. Both went to the temple. Both prayed. Both had a desperate need for righteousness.

But at the most essential point these two Jews were complete opposites. That essential point is: *How are we justified before God?* On that crucial issue the radical difference between them is found in where each man put his trust.

Jesus aimed this parable at smug, self-righteous people. It does not exhaust the subject of justification by faith, but focuses rather on the core issue.

Legally—that is, so far as the Jewish law and customs were concerned—these two men were at opposite extremes. The despised publican was a renegade who collected taxes for the hated Romans, pocketing huge surpluses for himself. Yes, he was a sinner, and Jesus did not deny it.

By contrast the Pharisee was an honored man. He was scrupulous in his observance of the law and the traditions. His family could point to him with pride. His wife could boast confidently that *her* husband was no playboy. He fasted twice a week (Mondays and Thursdays, good days to display one's religion in the marketplace). He tithed on everything he acquired (quickly—nominate him for church treasurer!). When

he boasted about living a clean life, Jesus did not dispute the claim.

But he was *lost*. Both men were lost. The difference was the publican realized it, but the Pharisee did not.

Both men went to the temple to pray. Let us watch them.

Certain of his moral qualifications, the Pharisee goes right on in. But the publican, realizing his guilt, stands way back.

The Pharisee is praying "with himself." We listen in. "God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess."

From what he said, we sense that he considered himself to be better even than most other Pharisees.

After telling the Lord what he is not, he proceeds to inform him "what a good boy am I," evidently assuming that the Almighty appreciated the information. Of course, he was not really thanking God, but only congratulating himself. Obviously, that is not prayer. It is only ego-exercise. It is pride.

All sin is selfishness in one form or another, and pride is selfishness in its most primary form.

Pride is comparative, and pride is competitive. It regards self as "better than..." It enjoys what it possesses only if it is more or better than what someone else is or has. Pride focuses on the sins and shortcomings of others. It pleads a self-merit that is purchased with the debased currency of disdain.

It is always easy to be good by contrast. Pride measures against others. But it never dares to measure itself against God. No soul who has a proper view of the character of God ever pleads its own goodness.

By looking down on others, he was able to look up to himself. He was sure that he had done all that the law of God required, plus much more, thus creating a surplus of righteousness and a claim on God, making the Almighty his debtor. Such is the impenetrable wall of Pharisaism.

Apparently this Pharisee overlooked Isaiah 64:6: "But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags."

Meanwhile, the publican was standing on the far side of the court, his eyes looking down but his heart reaching up. He was at the crisis of conviction.

What brought this man under such agony for sin that he could stand it no longer? What made him desperate to get right with God? We do not know the sequence of events, but we can be sure that God had a hand in it. God wanted this man, and He

was after him. Such is the loving faithfulness of the Lord. No sinner comes to such an awakening without the gracious influence of the Spirit of God. Conviction's deepest misery often occurs at the verge of salvation's jubilant joy.

"God be merciful to me, a sinner!" [literally, "*the sinner!*"] (verse 13). Now, that is *real* praying. The soul that is desperate for mercy will get right to the point.

The mercy of God—*that* is the only basis of our justification. The publican's confession implied honest repentance, for no one who is honest with God will continue in sin. But confession and repentance, though necessary, could not of themselves save him. He was saved by mercy alone, received the moment he threw himself in faith upon God's mercy.

"Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us" (Titus 3:5).

Jesus declared: "This man went down to his house justified rather than the other" (verse 14). The justified man went home to live a justified life. What joy there must have been in that home!

Where did the Pharisee go after he left the temple? Scripture does not tell us. Probably he went right on living his "clean" religious life, praying, fasting, and tithing—*right into hell*. God could not give the man mercy because he did not want it. He saw no need for mercy. He had a fatally false estimate of his own moral character. He was trusting in himself.

Millions of the Pharisee's spiritual descendants have fallen into the same trap. They proliferate in churches and out of them.

Multitudes are trusting in their own merits, religious and non-religious. Challenge the average man-on-the-street or person-in-the-pew to repent and trust Jesus Christ alone for salvation and righteousness, and they will retort by telling you how good they are. So few seem to understand that the only way of salvation is the mercy of God in Jesus Christ, received by faith alone.

Let us never forget that we can be outwardly upright and yet lost. Most people who are depending on their own merits to get them to Heaven fall far short of the Pharisee. Tell the Pharisee who fasts twice a week and pays his tithes how good you are, and he will sneer at you.

So we must stop trying to beat the Pharisees at their own game. It will never work. We must simply be honest with God and plead, "God be merciful to me, a sinner." There is mercy right now for all who will come to Jesus Christ in faith.

23.

WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

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For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard.

And he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you." And they went.

Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise.

And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, "Why have you been standing here idle all day?" They said to him, "Because no man hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive."

So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, "Call the laborers, and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first."

And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius.

But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. And when they had received it they complained against the landowner, saying, "These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day."

But he answered one of them and said, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?"

So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen.

-Matthew 20:1-16

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The eyes of the disciples were fixed intently on the receding form with its drooping shoulders and bowed head. The rich young ruler had come to Jesus with the question:

"Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?"

Christ's answer probed the inquirer's character to the core. "Sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me," He said (Matthew 19:21).

Eternal life could not be his apart from a change of heart, and he refused to do what a change of heart would mean for him.

Peter's own mind was troubled as he watched the young man walk away in dejection. The Master's words had deeply shaken his own cherished notions about the mission of Jesus and his own personal prospects in the anticipated kingdom.

Peter ask the Lord, "We have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?" (Matthew 19:27).

Peter's inquiry spotlighted a much deeper issue. What were the disciples really after? What was their motive for following Jesus?

After reassuring them that all who truly follow Him will be fully taken care of, the Lord proceeded by a parable to lay down a principle concerning rewards in the kingdom. We call it the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. This parable along with the parables of the talents and the minas form the parabolic teaching of Christ concerning rewards.

In this parable a landowner went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. Perhaps it was autumn, the time of the grape harvest. At 6:00 a.m. he found some of the best and most willing workers, and contracted with them for a whole day's work for a denarius (good pay for a day's work in those days).

Needing more workers, he went back to the marketplace at 9:00 a.m., then again at noon, and again at 3:00 p.m., picking up a few each time. At 5:00 p.m., an hour before quitting time, he gathered up as many more workers as he could find to complete the job.

The workers who were hired after 6:00 a.m. had lost their bargaining position and had to depend on the fairness of the employer for their pay. All they had was his promise "Whatever is right you will receive."

He asked the last group why they had been standing there all day without work. They replied that no one had hired them.

This raises some questions. Where were they all day? How had they been missed? Were they loitering around a corner, just out of sight? Did they really want to work?

When pay time came the employer did something very unusual. He gave all the workers the same pay, beginning with the last ones hired and working up to the first.

Right away there was trouble. When the early workers saw the last ones get a full

day's pay for only an hour's work, they began hoping for a big bonus. When it did not come, they became angry.

The employer answered one of them (probably the spokesman for the group), "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?" (verses 13-15).

The sovereign will of the owner is an emphatic point of the parable. If God is extra generous with some laborers, He has taken nothing from the others.

The generosity of the owner exposed the envy in the hearts of the all-day workers. They would have felt better if the others had received less, even though that would not have given them any more!

All went home with the same amount but with different attitudes. Envy produced dissatisfaction and robbed its victims of their contentment. Their negative attitude deprived them of their sense of accomplishment and diminished their feelings of self-worth. They got everything that they had been expecting all day long, but seeing the liberality of the householder toward the others prevented them from enjoying it.

In this parable Jesus is not giving a lesson in economic theory. He merely used a familiar setting to bring out a spiritual truth.

He is not advocating that we put off working in His vineyard until late in life. The eleventh-hour workers received the same base pay, but think of the opportunities they lost.

He is not teaching that eternal life is a reward for our service. God is not in debt to anyone.

But although we do not work for eternal life, eternal life puts us to work! The parable implies the urgency of the harvest. God wants workers, and He calls them early. But early or late, there is work to be done, and a continuous call is going out for laborers.

Let us get busy for God and leave the matter of rewards to Him—that is the message. Eternal life is God's free gift to all believers. How much do we want on top of that? What do we think we deserve under grace?

No amount of service and sacrifice can merit us anything. Having been promised eternal life, our "pay" as redeemed sinners is the high privilege of being workers together with God from the earliest opportunity. If those early workers had the householder's interests at heart and if they truly cared about the harvest, they would have been grateful for the additional workers.

A major lesson of the parable is that discontent erodes discipleship. Many talented and dedicated workers have been tarnished by wrong attitudes. Their attitudes

devalue their efforts. Quality service is determined more by attitude than by duration.

The Lord was helping the disciples see how inappropriate was the question, "Therefore what shall we have?" He wanted them to realize the unworthiness of the spirit behind it.

Although the apostles would be the earliest into the harvest, the Lord might ask them to step aside and let some who came later on stand first in line at the end of the day. Paul put it this way: "For I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death." (1 Corinthians 4:9). In fact, Jesus told Peter that when he became old, he would be tied up and carried away. So if he were in it just for what he could get, he should forget it!

Now Jesus did not say that *all* who are first shall be last. He said "many." Some will remain first of course.

Some will have a greater degree of usefulness and joy in heaven as a result of their greater usefulness and diligence here. Excellence in discipleship produces its own results both now and forever.

In this parable Jesus is talking about our attitude under grace. When we begin to feel that we deserve something above what God's grace has provided for all believers, we need to go and stand at the end of the line!

It is not always easy for the early laborers to make room for the newer workers. When we look back over many years of sacrificial giving, hard work, and faithfulness, it becomes easy for us to feel we own the harvest field.

"Grandpa built this church and kept the doors open when there were just a handful of people coming. Aunt Mary donated her organ and played it every Sunday for years. This is *our* church, and we're not going to let all these new people come in and take over!"

Sound familiar?

"Godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Timothy 6:6). What then is godliness *without* contentment? It is what is left of the gain after a big discount.

We who receive eternal life as the gift of God must glory not in our long and sacrificial service but in the goodness of our Redeemer.

Another lesson to remember is that great sacrifice is no guarantee in itself against great failure. The same Peter who boasted that he had forsaken all later on denied all. As he went out and wept bitterly, we do not hear him asking, "What shall we have therefore?"

Peter was restored by the Savior's grace. Never again did he assume he had something coming for leaving all and following Jesus. He had learned his lesson well.

Jesus is coming. We might be the eleventh-hour workers. The night is coming when no one can work. Let us get into the harvest, thankful for the privilege of serving in the vineyard of such a gracious Savior. Not, What can I get? but, What can I give? should be our question.

24.

THE SURE TEST

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A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, "Son, go work today in my vineyard."

He answered and said, "I will not," but afterward he regretted it and went.

Then he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, "I go, sir," but he did not go.

Which of the two did the will of his father?

-Matthew 21:28-31

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We all recognize that accurate medical tests are very important. Medically speaking, life itself can depend on a correct early diagnosis. When it comes to our health, we want no guesswork.

But what about our souls? Must we leave our spiritual well-being to guess-work, or has God provided a test that will give us an accurate diagnosis of our spiritual condition?

Certainly God would not leave such a vital issue to chance. No indeed! In fact, He has given us a totally reliable and accurate test. It is the test of obedience.

The Bible says, "Now by this we know that we know Him if we keep His commandments. He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. (1 John 2:3-5).

Jesus put it in the form of a parable. In Jerusalem, just a few days before His crucifixion, the chief priests and elders came to Him with this question: "By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?" (Matthew 21:23).

Jesus turned the question around by asking them about the baptism that John the Baptist administered: "Where was it from? From heaven, or from men?" (verse 25).

They were afraid to answer either way. The Lord's point was this: if John's conduct was above reproach, why then did they reject him and his testimony concerning Jesus?

The parable was a double-barreled blast. It was about a man who had two sons.

In contrast to the big commercial spread portrayed in the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, our Lord here paints the picture of a small family farm. Success depended on the participation of all members of the family. Though it was the father's vineyard, it was everyone's responsibility. All had a stake in the outcome. All depended on the harvest.

The well-being of all required the commitment of all. Also someday the sons would inherit that vineyard.

In view of all this, the father should not have needed to ask his sons to work in the vineyard. The obligation to do so should have been obvious. If their priorities were in order, they would have gone to work with no thought of being asked to do so. The fact that they had to be asked should have shamed them.

But what is this? What is the first son saying? "I will not." Curt, shameless brazen disobedience! Look at the kind of person he had allowed himself to become. This does not develop overnight. Character is formed by constantly confirmed choices.

No doubt the father had suffered this boorish insolence before. But he decided to try once more, to give this irresponsible delinquent another opportunity to be something different.

But, no. The answer was the same. The father's forbearance only brought him another insult, another deep pain.

But look again! Who is that going out to the vineyard? The same son! Something must have gotten through to him. Maybe it was the hurt look on his father's face. Maybe his conscience made him so miserable he could not tolerate his disobedience any longer.

What joy rewarded the gracious, patient father! The material worth of the son's labor was small compared to the value of his obedience.

But the father had a second son. He, too, had been directed to the vineyard.

"I go, sir," he replied glibly. But the Bible says, "but he did not go."

No, he was not the rude, obnoxious person his brother had turned out to be. He knew what his father wanted to hear. So he had a ready answer. He knew all the right words. He was a nice boy, very polite and proper in his response to his father. But it meant nothing. It was empty pretense. He was living a lie.

His hypocrisy was as great an insult to his father as was his brother's insolence. Perhaps it made him feel good to say, "I go, sir." If so, good feelings were all he had. He accomplished nothing.

Which son did the will of his father? The answer is obvious.

Really, neither son obeyed as he should have. Both should have replied, "I go, sir," and then have gone immediately to work.

Both showed a callous disregard for the effects of their selfishness. Neither cared about the interests of their father, the success of the harvest, or even for their own real interests. The best either of them gave their father was obedience following repentance. Even the repentant son had wasted the early part of the day, a loss he could never recover.

So it is with us. Only Christ always obeyed the Father. "All we like sheep have gone astray" (Isaiah 53:6). For that reason none of us can boast. All we can offer our Heavenly Father is full obedience after repentance. We cannot be justified by works because we have not been obedient all our lifetime. Only His grace has granted us the opportunity of repentance and the privilege of serving Him from that point on.

No doubt the first son knew his brother was a hollow hypocrite. Character develops and displays itself over the years. He had come to despise hypocrisy. At least his father knew exactly where *he* stood and how *he* felt. "At least I'm no hypocrite," was his inner boast.

How often we hear it. "At least I'm no hypocrite!" Then what *is* the person who makes that claim? Is the open sinner any better than the hypocrite?

It was easy for each of the brothers to justify himself by condemning the other. It's an old game, isn't it? It is called, "Better than you." People feel less condemnation if they can point to someone they think is behaving worse than they are.

The truth is that each brother needed to get his eyes off the other and take a good look at himself. *Both* needed to repent.

And one of them did! How do we know? Because he went into the vineyard. Obedience is the proof. Repentance produced something. It put him into the vineyard.

True religion is more than words. It is a decision, and decision produces action—obedience. What counts is not so much what we know, but what we obey.

The prophet said, "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams or ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:6-8).

Jesus found it necessary to issue this warning: "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven" (Matthew 7:21).

Am I a Christian? Here is the test: Am I obeying God? If not, my profession is worthless. We have only what we obey. That is the way truth is.

Let us ask ourselves, Am I the first son? Does my disobedience bring constant grief to my Heavenly Father? If so I must waste no more time, but repent and obey.

Or am I the second son? Do I have a form of godliness without the reality? A profession but no possession? Am I playing at Christianity? Then I too, need to repent.

Some who are staggering on the streets and lying in the gutters will repent and enter the kingdom of God before some who are sitting in church pews.

Jesus said the harlots will go into the kingdom of God before self-righteous hypocrites (verse 31). Of course, He calls both classes—all classes—of people to repentance. He reached out and saved both Matthew the publican and Saul the Pharisee. He wants all—the outcasts and the hypocrites—to repent, believe and be saved.

The Father is calling. What is our answer, *your* answer?

25.

MURDERING FARMERS AND ARROGANT BUILDERS

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There was a certain landowner who planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a winepress in it and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country.

Now when the vintage-time drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers, that they might receive its fruit. And the vinedressers took his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another.

Again he sent other servants more than the first, and they did likewise to them.

Then last of all he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son."

But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, "This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and seize his inheritance." So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him.

Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?

They said to him, "He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers, who will render to him the fruits in their seasons."

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?'" [Psalm 118:22, 23].

-Matthew 21:33-42

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It was the Passover week in Jerusalem. In only a few days Jesus would be crucified. By now the religious rulers were waging open war against the Galilean. Jesus responded in some of his most stinging parables. The Master had just exposed them in the parable of the two sons. Now He continues: "Hear another parable."

Hear *another* parable? No doubt some of the rulers felt that they had heard enough already. Jesus had just shown them to be hypocrites. Now He was about to reveal them as murderers.

Naturally, the owner (householder) of the vineyard planted the vines first. Then,

while the vines were growing, he built the rock wall, dug the winepress, and erected the observation tower for defense. Finally he followed a common practice of letting out the entire vineyard to tenant farmers, who produced and processed the crop for a share.

In the parable, a very bizarre drama unfolds. Either the parable pictures a society where law and order were absent, or else Jesus purposefully posed an improbable situation to give added punch to the point He was making.

The metaphor that Jesus used was familiar to His hearers. The prophet Isaiah had spoken of Israel as a vineyard (Isaiah 5:1-7). So the way the Lord formed the parable made its meaning easy to see. The vineyard was Israel. The householder is God. The tenant farmers were the rulers of Israel. The servants of the householder who were mistreated were the prophets. The householder's murdered son was Jesus Himself. The parable was practically a mirror where all saw themselves clearly.

The parable was also a very strong claim by the Lord Jesus to be the Son of God, and an implication that they recognized Him as such.

One strong point of the parable is the marvelous longsuffering of God. What mortal would seemingly do nothing when his servants were being mistreated and killed? What householder would respond to such acts of criminal violence by patiently sending more servants and finally his well-beloved son? Such is divine forbearance!

But postponed justice only accumulates. The mounting atrocities will be avenged by the personal intervention of the Householder. Sin will be judged—that is the final answer to the question concerning Christ's authority!

"Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?" (verse 40).

Jesus pictured a scenario of such flagrant injustice as would outrage almost anyone's sensibilities. "He will destroy those wicked men miserably....," they declared (verse 41). Luke records that some so resisted the personal application of the parable that they retorted cynically, "Certainly not!" (Luke 20:16).

That desperate attempt to deflect the moral indictment that the parable hurled at them prompted Jesus to change the metaphor from farmers to builders and to bring down upon His adversaries the weight of this question: "Have you never read in the Scriptures, 'The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone?'" (verse 42).

They were the builders. They rejected the Chief Cornerstone.

But we rejoice that He is now the Chief Cornerstone! The vineyard (the kingdom of God) has been transferred to those who are rendering to God the fruits of righteousness. The Bible calls them: "A chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people" (1 Peter 2:9).

What matters with God is not our position in the vineyard, but whether or not we are producing fruit for the Householder. Jesus said, "By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples" (John 15:8).

Also, what are we doing with the Cornerstone, Jesus Christ? The cornerstone of a building is the ultimate reference point for the entire structure. So it is with Christ. Everything in our churches and everything in our lives must conform to Him.

What do people do with a cornerstone? They build upon it, of course. A cornerstone has only one purpose and one place. Builders must either build to it or reject it, because there is really nothing else one can do with a cornerstone.

Jesus made it clear that if we cast the cornerstone aside, we will stumble over it and be injured. If it falls on us, it will smash us (Matthew 21:44). Just so, if we do not build upon Jesus Christ, we will stumble over Him. Millions do. He is to them "a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense" (1 Peter 2:8). They know only enough about Him to stumble over Him. The result is broken people everywhere.

For them the worst is yet to come. The Cornerstone will fall on them and "grind them to powder." They will continue to stumble over Him until either they accept Him as the Cornerstone of their lives, or He falls on them with the full weight of His righteous kingdom.

What kind of life are we building? Does it "square" with Jesus Christ? Let us make sure that the rejected Cornerstone is the Foundation of our lives.

26.

THE ROYAL WEDDING FEAST

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The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who made a marriage for his son, and sent out his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding; and they were not willing to come.

Again, he sent out other servants, saying, "Tell those who are invited, 'See, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and fatted cattle are killed, and all things are ready. Come to the wedding.'"

But they made light of it and went their ways, one to his own farm, another to his business. And the rest seized his servants, treated them spitefully, and killed them.

But when the king heard about it, he was furious. And he sent out his armies, destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city.

Then he said to his servants, "The wedding is ready but those who were invited were not worthy. Therefore go into the highways, and as many as you find, invite to the wedding."

So those servants went out into the highways and gathered together all whom they found, both bad and good. And the wedding hall was filled with guests.

But when the king came in to see the guests, he saw a man there who did not have on a wedding garment. So he said to him, "Friend, how did you come in here without a wedding garment?" And he was speechless.

Then the king said to the servants, "Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

For many are called, but few are chosen.

-Matthew 22:2-14

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It was Passover time, and Jerusalem was alive with excitement. One of the main attractions was Jesus of Nazareth. The scribes and Pharisees had been sparring with Him, probing for an advantage, but now the conflict had erupted into an open battle.

The religious authorities had made the decision to put Jesus to death, and He knew that His hour had come. So His last parables were directed against His enemies. They

were nothing less than weapons of war.

The Lord had stung them with the parables of the two sons and the wicked farmers. Then He brought down upon them this parable, one portraying such extremely unreasonable behavior that it exposed their moral madness in the clearest possible light.

It is similar to the parable of the great supper, given by our Lord on a previous occasion and recorded in Luke 14:16-24 (see Chapter 16, "Come To The Feast"). But it is also different in some ways.

In the parable we are now considering, a king prepared a wedding feast for his son. Personal invitations were sent out early to the privileged guests. Then when the feast was ready, the king's servants went out and personally summoned the guests.

But they refused to come. Unbelievable! Incredible behavior! Could such a thing ever happen in real life among sane people?

The marriage of a king's son had profound political significance. To be invited to the royal feast was a great favor, and to refuse it was unthinkable. Such would be a gesture of disloyalty, an insult, even an act of rebellion. How could people in their right minds dare do such a thing?

But what is this? The king gave them another chance. In patience and mercy he proceeded to send other servants, saying, "Tell those who are invited, 'See, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and fatted cattle are killed and all things are ready. Come to the wedding.'" In the sovereign's name they tried to coax the reluctant guests. In this way the king went to the verge of begging them to accept the gracious honor he was bestowing on them. What marvelous grace! What amazing condescension!

But in vain. The invited ones walked away from an invitation to the king's table, "one to his own farm, another to his business." The rest of them attacked the king's servants, beating and killing them!

What should the king do now? Would forbearance continue to be a virtue under these new conditions? Who could say to the king, "Be patient and gracious"? Had not patience and graciousness done all it could do? Continued forbearance would be totally inappropriate. The situation now demanded justice; nothing else would satisfy the law of reason, which is truly the law of love.

So the king sent out his armies, destroyed the killers and burned up their city.

It was a fatal mistake to regard the righteous wrath of the outraged king so lightly. They showed their contempt for their king by refusing his invitation, mistreating his servants, and obviously doing so with no fear of consequences.

So in the interest of his own kingdom, the king had to destroy one of his own cities. Evidently, the treason had spread throughout the community.

What an object lesson! Generations to come would remember it, and abhor even the thought of rebellion!

But the feast will go on. The royal wedding will have guests. The purpose of the king will be fulfilled. So the king said, "Therefore go into the highways, and as many as you find, invite to the wedding." The servants went out and brought in all who would come.

Then, according to custom, the king came in to inspect the guests. Quickly his eyes spotted an obvious and calculated insult. One of the guests was not wearing a wedding garment!

The wedding garment was a symbol of respect, loyalty and faithfulness. Some believe the king furnished these garments to the guest as they arrived. At any rate, this man deliberately refrained from wearing the wedding garment, possibly because he endorsed the arrogance and treason of the murderers. Perhaps he was a silent protester, openly condemning the king for his swift justice and demonstrating his support for those who had perished for their crimes. He displayed the same character and attitude as those who had perished.

"Friend, how did you come in here without a wedding garment?" the king demanded. The guest was speechless. His silence slowed confusion and perhaps contempt.

"Then the king to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"

Had not the king's honor and authority suffered enough? Had not sedition already threatened the well-being of the realm? Such intransigence was intolerable and had to be dealt with swiftly.

But what if the man were only careless? In view of what had happened to the rebellious city, such carelessness was totally inexcusable and revealed an indifference equal to open hostility.

Could it be that they had to bind him and take him away because he refused to go willingly, choosing rather through resistance to play out his drama of protest to the limit? Poor soul. He did not hurt the banquet, but he certainly ruined himself.

The immediate thrust of Jesus' parable was obvious to his hearers. God is the King. Christ himself is the King's Son. Israel had enjoyed the high and unique honor of being called to his feast. But they had despised the divine summons, abused the prophets, and in A.D. 70 their city was destroyed by the Roman army under Titus. They who were bidden refused to respond, and were rejected. Since then the call has gone out to "whoever will," Gentile as well as Jew.

This wedding feast is not the marriage supper of the Lamb. No one at that marriage supper will lack the wedding garment. There will be no mixture of bad and good there.

The elect will not be guests, but will make up the Bride herself!

The feast of this parable is the banquet of redemption. It portrays the provisions, joys, happiness, honor and glory of the gospel and its royal fellowship now in this present age of grace.

The gospel call goes to everyone. But it is no casual invitation from someone lacking rank or station.

When the President telephoned the successful astronauts and said he would like for them to visit him, a reporter remarked, "you can bet they'll be there." An invitation from the Commander-in-Chief is a top priority summons. Likewise when the Eternal King issues the invitation, it becomes a supreme command.

"Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30).

We must respond, and we must do so in God's time. The opportunity to comply is limited. So the command is urgent. Take care of the King's summons immediately, before farm, family, business, or anything else!

In a church congregation sit both bad and good. Some have the wedding garment; some do not. This wedding garment is a necessity. It is the "righteous acts of the saints" (Revelation 19:6-9), the outward life of holiness that is the Scriptural evidence of a truly regenerate heart.

The gospel summons goes out to all. But it is not enough merely to attend. We must also be transformed. Many settle into the activities and social life of the church, but never experience a real change of heart and life. They like the fringe benefits of the Christian fellowship, but they refuse to experience personally the inner reality of that fellowship. They do not have the outer robe of a sanctified life because they do not have the inner robe of a justified heart.

There are two kinds of rebellion in this parable: refusing the invitation, and accepting the invitation but rejecting its conditions.

So the self-righteous guest says, "I don't need a wedding garment. My own robes are good enough. I live a good life. I am accepted by my church and community. I donate time and money. I'm doing the King a favor by taking time out of my busy schedule to attend the feast. I don't need to change my lifestyle, and I won't."

What is the divine verdict on such a person? "Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and cast him into outer darkness."

Yes, the King is coming; and when He enters, there will be no hiding. The robe—the life—will be open to His keen inspection. All who do not have on the garment of righteousness will be cast into outer darkness, where there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

So let each of us take an honest look at our life. Will it stand the inspection of the King? If we trust Christ as our Savior, we are justified by faith. The robe of a justified and sanctified heart will be visible in a justified and sanctified lifestyle.

27.

DON'T MISS THE WEDDING

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Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.

Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish. Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps.

But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept.

And at midnight a cry was heard: "Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!"

Then all those virgins arose 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, "No; lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves."

And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut.

Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, "Lord, Lord, open to us!" But he answered and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you."

Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of man is coming.

-Matthew 25:1-13

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The Lord's public confrontation with the religious rulers was over. The countdown to the cross was on. Jesus was ready for His great ordeal. But first He must impress an important truth upon His disciples.

So He took them to the mount of Olives for a special discourse about the future, including His second coming.

In the course of His teaching, Jesus gave them several parables. All have one central theme: *keep awake and ready*. Some time could elapse before the Master returns. There would be a tendency to become lax and careless, a tendency that must be overcome at all costs. But the Lord will return, and suddenly. It could be at any time; so be ready, for only the ones who are ready will enter the kingdom.

First, there is the parable of the porter (gate-keeper), recorded in Mark 13:34-37:

"For the Son of Man is as a man taking a far journey, who left his house, and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch.

"Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning: lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping.

"And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch." (KJV).

The message of this parable is that we are to be ready always and at our post of duty.

This is followed by the parable of the man returning from the wedding. It is recorded in Luke 12:35-38:

"Let your waist be girded and your lamps burning; and you yourselves be like men who wait for their master, when he will return from the wedding, that when he comes and knocks they may open to him immediately.

"Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching. Assuredly, I say to you that he will gird himself and have them sit down to eat, and will come and serve them.

"And if he should come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants."

Again, the message is the same: be awake and ready to receive the Master whenever He arrives, no matter what the hour.

Then Jesus gave the parable of the master of the house who kept constant vigil because he did not know when the thief might come. We find it in Matthew 24:43-44 and Luke 12:39, 40. Here is Luke's account:

"But this know, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into.

"Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

This parable continues the same message: be vigilant; the Lord will return when least expected.

Then, at some length, in the parable of the good and evil servants, the Lord dealt specifically with the problem of abused authority (Matthew 24:45-51 and Luke 12:42-48). Again, here is Luke's record:

"Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his master will make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of food in due season?"

"Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all that he has.

"But if that servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,' and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and be drunk; the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the unbelievers.

"And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more."

In this parable Jesus warned the disciples—and us—of the danger of misusing long-term positions of leadership. This danger arises when we lose sight of the imminence of the Lord's return. The message is especially for the clergy—do not take leadership authority in the kingdom for granted, and do not assume it to be your personal possession to be exercised in an autocratic manner and for your own indulgence.

Ministers must keep constantly mindful that they are accountable to the true Lord of the Church, who could come at any time. It could be that Peter was remembering this day and its parables when later on he wrote to ministers, "Nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:3).

Subsequent history has demonstrated how appropriate and necessary is our Lord's warning. From Diotrefes (see 3 John 9, 10) on down through centuries of oppressive religious authority to present-day opportunists, many evil servants have begun to beat their fellow-servants and to eat and drink with the drunken. This should cause any minister to think twice before yielding to the temptation to abuse God's people and misuse his ministry for his own gratification.

These parables all lead up to the parable of the ten virgins and the parable of the talents. In these parables the message is driven home with dramatic force—"Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming" (Matthew 25:13).

Let us examine specifically the parable of the ten virgins.

Perhaps more than any other, this parable has been abused by over-interpretation. We must remember that parables are intended to convey one central message. So is this one. "Be ready" Jesus is saying.

The setting is a wedding, a time of joy, and excitement. It should have been and

could have been a happy occasion for everyone.

We notice that the bride is left completely out of the picture. This fact should caution us not to press the details of the parable.

Jesus tells us that there were ten virgins in a wedding entourage. Five were wise; five were foolish. The foolish five were foolish not because of what they did. They did what they did because they were foolish. They were thoughtless girls and they were behaving accordingly.

The wise ones took extra oil with them so their lamps would not go out, just in case the bridegroom did not appear as soon as expected. Smart girls!

The foolish made two mistakes (and the foolish are still making them). They did not get enough oil to last until the bridegroom came, no matter how long that might be. And when they should have realized that they might not have enough, instead of going out and getting what they needed in time to be back and ready with lamps burning, they just went to sleep with the rest.

If they had taken enough, they would have been ready. If they had been awake and thoughtful, they could have gone and returned in time. They did neither. So they were doubly foolish.

All slumbered and slept. The wise slept, but at least they had made a decision that would carry them through. The foolish slept, even though they had not prepared adequately. Someone has said that they were not *unprepared*, but *under-prepared*. They were like the man who set out to build, but did not sit down first and count the cost (Luke 14:28-30).

It is easy to stay awake if we know the big event we are anticipating is going to happen right away. Temporary enthusiasm is sufficient in such cases. But when time goes by without anything happening, when the necessities of daily living push us into a routine and occupy our time and attention, the tendency for all of us is to get sleepy. Then, as Calvin says, perseverance is what succeeds. And, we might add, perseverance depends on preparation.

Now, what was the main reason the foolish virgins missed the marriage feast? They were late. When the bridegroom came, they were not present and prepared to welcome him. And why were they not present? They did not get enough oil in the first place.

Many who profess to be Christians are merely fooling around. They are playing with God. Unless they wake up, they will find themselves on the outside, saying, "Lord, Lord, open to us!" The foolish in heart will never make it.

When the heavenly Bridegroom is announced it will be time right then to go to meet Him. After the midnight cry there will be no time to secure what we need and no place to get it. And we cannot get it from someone else, for there is no second-hand experience with God. Get it for yourself. Get it now and get what will carry you through

until Jesus comes. Get the real thing! Keep walking in the Spirit. Continue in the grace of God. Stay put and stay awake!

Jesus said, "Those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut" (verse 10). It will be too late after the Bridegroom comes. "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2).

28.

USE IT OR LOSE IT

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A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return. So he called ten of his servants, delivered to them ten minas, and said unto them, "Do business till I come."

But his citizens hated him, and sent a delegation after him, saying, "We will not have this man to reign over us."

And so it was that after he returned, having received the kingdom, he then commanded these servants, to whom he had given the money, to be called to him, that he might know how much every man had gained by trading.

Then came the first, saying, "Master, your mina has earned ten minas." And he said to him, "Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities."

And the second came, saying, "Master, your mina has earned five minas." Likewise he said to him, "You also be over five cities."

And another came, saying, "Master, here is your mina, which I have kept put away in a handkerchief. For I feared you, because you are an austere man. You collect what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow."

And he said to him, "Out of your own mouth I will judge you, you wicked servant. You knew that I was an austere man, collecting what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow. Why then did you not put my money in the bank, that 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 him who has ten minas". (But they said to him, "Master, he has ten minas.") "For I say to you, that to everyone who has will be given; and from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him.

"But bring here those enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, and slay them before me."

-Luke 19:12-27

For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey.

Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them and made another five talents. And likewise he who had received two gained two more also. But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord's money.

After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them.

So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, "Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them." His lord said to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord."

He also who had received two talents came and said, "Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them." His lord said to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord."

Then he who had received the one talent came and said, "Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours." But his lord answered and said to him, "You wicked and lazy servant; you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest. Therefore take the talent from him, and give it to him who has ten talents.

"For to every one who has more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

-Matthew 25:14-30

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The countdown to the cross was on and Jesus was living out the final days of His earthly ministry. During that tumultuous yet crucial time the master gave several parables, some in the hearing of the crowds, some privately to His disciples.

Two of those parables are very similar and are complementary. Both address the subject of privileges, responsibilities and rewards in the kingdom. But upon close examination we see some distinct differences between them. They are known as the parable of the pounds and the parable of the talents. The former was spoken in Jericho as Jesus journeyed toward Jerusalem. It was heard by an excited mob caught up in the

expectation of the immediate appearance of the kingdom of God as they understood it. The latter was given several days later to the disciples privately as part of the Olivet discourse.

In both parables the Lord is looking beyond His impending passion to the long gospel age and its final culmination. He informs both the expectant crowd and the shortsighted disciples that He is about to leave and that they are in for a long period of hard work before the kingdom arrives in its fullness.

First we go to Jericho and look at the parable of the "pounds" (minas). We read it in Luke 19:12-27.

There was a historical backdrop to this parable, for we are told that Archelaus had gone from Jericho to Rome to obtain authority in Judea from the Romans. The historical event paralleled the parable in some points and must have been in the mind of Jesus' hearers as He spoke.

In this parable a nobleman went to the distant capital of a ruling power to be appointed king over his own country, probably on the basis of his noble birth. Before he left, he entrusted to each of his slaves a mina, which was worth about a hundred days' wages at the time, and told them to get busy with the money. Meanwhile, some citizens sent a message to the capitol opposing the claim of the nobleman.

During the nobleman's absence, his slaves used his money in different ways with correspondingly different results. When he returned, the new king called the slaves to account for themselves, and also severely punished his enemies.

We move now to the passion week in Jerusalem, to the Mount of Olives, where Jesus is privately instructing His disciples. Embodied in the discourse is this Parable of the Talents.

In this parable, a businessman prepared to go into a far country. He called his slaves and entrusted his property to them to manage and invest during his absence. Here the amounts were in talents, worth many times more than minas. These slaves also used their lord's money in different ways with correspondingly different results. After a long time the businessman returned and called for an accounting of how his substantial assets had been managed, and dealt with each slave accordingly.

Now, let us look at the common points of the two parables.

In both parables the rightful owner is going to be gone for a long time. He entrusts his assets (expressed in both parables in monetary units) to his slaves, who do not own them but must nevertheless manage them wisely just as though they were their own. The return of the owner is certain. The slaves will be held accountable.

These parables contain a wealth of truth for us today. Jesus has gone to Heaven to receive His kingdom. It is not a kingdom to be gained by earthly political or military power, but is His directly from the Father by rightful inheritance.

Meanwhile, our Lord's enemies here refuse to accept Him as Lord. They would rather be ruined than ruled. We, His love-slaves, have been entrusted with His assets—God-given gifts, advantages and resources. These are not our own, as is clear from 1 Corinthians 4:7 and Ephesians 4:7. This is our privilege.

We are to do business for our Lord with His assets that He has entrusted to us as long as He is away. This is our responsibility.

When He returns, we shall give account of how we managed things, and will be treated accordingly in a just and fair manner. The disobedient will be punished.

We notice that in the parable of the minas each slave was given exactly the same amount: one mina. This says to us that in some endowments we are all equal. That is, we all have essentially the same amount of some things. We all have twenty-four hours in a day. Our natural endowments are similar in that we normally have two eyes, two hands, two feet. We have similar life expectancies at birth. So some endowments are equal through our common humanity.

Jesus is teaching us that what we have equally as human beings we are obligated to employ diligently for the highest good. The "mina," the common ability, might not be much compared to the outstanding "talents" of some, but that does not release us from the duty to be the best we can with who we are and what we have.

The first servant produced ten-fold, and his lord said, "Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities" (Luke 19:17). By being faithful in a very little (one mina) he proved that he would handle great responsibility faithfully as well.

But what about the next man? He had received the same endowment, but had produced only five with it. His lord merely replied, "You also be over five cities." (verse 19). In other words, you did all right, but you could have done better. The only difference was in the degree of diligence. Greater motivation—taking his responsibility more seriously and applying himself with greater discipline—would have doubled the output.

This does not mean that we must live under stress and strain. And it does not mean that the second slave did not live up to all the light he had. Had he not done so, he would have been guilty of insincerity. He pursued the right values with the strength demanded by his perception of those values. But how much greater good would have been accomplished had his values been clearer to him and therefore had he pursued his master's interests with more diligence!

The emphasis, now, is different in the parable of the talents. There each man was given a different amount, according to their individual abilities. This says to us that in some endowments we are not equal. That is, we have different gifts and abilities; and often when we do have similar endowments, we have then in unequal amounts.

Some of these endowments are innate; we were born with them. Some are circumstantial; we were born into them. Some are spiritual; we were anointed with them. But no matter how we came to possess them, they are all of God's grace.

Jesus says to us that what we have uniquely and in varying degrees we are obligated to employ with equal diligence for the highest good. In other words, we are to put forth 100% of whatever we have for the Master. Love can do no more; love will do no less.

So then, in the parable of the minas we see equal endowments used with unequal diligence, resulting in unequal approval. In the parable of the talents we see unequal endowments used with equal diligence resulting in equal approval.

If you have less than someone else, do not be discouraged if you are producing less. Do your best, for that might be more than some others are doing who are producing more than you are.

Human responsibility is clearly taught in both parables. The endowments are given to free moral agents. Each one sets his own pace. Each one disciplines himself.

We notice also that a positive attitude was a common quality of the productive workers. It comes through vibrantly in their statements ("Master, your mina has gained ten minas!" "Lord, see what I have done with your talents!"). We hear no hint of complaint. Such workers make good rulers!

Although they were under a direct command to work, their labors were done in complete liberty, for what was commanded was also what they wanted to do. It was like God commanding Adam and Eve and also Noah's family to "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28; 9:1). God has had no problem getting people to obey that one!

Obedience is enjoyable when we love God. In fact, only if we love God is true obedience possible. Love is what puts value on service. When God's goals and our goals are the same, every divine command is as though God said to us, "Enjoy!"

The attitude of these slaves toward their work reflected their attitude toward their master. This brings us to the loser in each parable.

Like the others, they got busy immediately, but doing the wrong things. One looked for a napkin to wrap around his mina, and the other started digging a hole to bury his talent. Both set about to avoid responsibility.

What was their problem? *Fear*. Their fear was a direct result of a wrong concept of their masters' character. Each man accused his lord right to his face of being hard, greedy and grabbing.

We wonder if each man really knew his master, or if perhaps his concept of his sovereign's character was the product of his own. If that be the case, he did not serve him because he did not properly regard him, and he did not properly regard him

because he did not truly know him.

Likewise, where there is a fundamental misconception of the character of God, proper love for Him is impossible. The person who blames God cannot love Him. Without love there is no confidence, but only fear. Without love there is no real service, but only slavishness.

Such souls think of God only as a joy-killer and a despot. They are ones likely to say, "I didn't ask for this talent!" or, "at least I didn't squander it!" They can give you a diatribe on the reasons for their disobedience. But in spite of their sophistry, the fact remains—they are unfruitful.

The remedy is a correct view of God, leading to the love that casts out fear (1 John 4:18).

We must avoid over-interpreting these parables, particularly at this point. Jesus certainly did not teach that our heavenly Father is hard and unfair. He is simply making a point, and that point is this: even taking the unprofitable slaves' evaluation of their master at face value, they still should have done *something* constructive with the resources placed in their hands. The very fact that they considered their masters to be a hard man should have spurred them to action.

It would have been just as easy to put the money in a nearby bank as in a napkin, and a lot easier than digging a hole! Their words and actions betrayed an attitude of rebellion. Their disobedience was deliberate. They were unprofitable because they wanted to be. By withholding even minimal service each man repudiated all allegiance to his lord. Because each man resented his sovereign, he chose to produce nothing for him, even though producing something would have been just as easy or even easier. *That* was what brought down on them the charge of wickedness.

"Take it from him." God's gifts will glorify Him. If not in the hands of the unprofitable, then surely in the hands of the productive.

"And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness." At this point Jesus made a sudden transition from parable to stark reality. Once more He pulled aside the curtain and gave His disciples a glimpse into that realm where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. After those shocking words, they would forever find even the thought of idleness abhorrent.

Our Lord has given us sufficient time to get the work done. But He has been gone a long time. The King has received the kingdom and He is coming. It could be soon. When He returns, each of us will give account of our gifts, abilities and resources.

Each of us has something, at least one mina. All of us are required to be fruitful thirty, sixty, or a hundred fold.

Sometimes they who have the least are tempted to judge that they have no responsibility at all. Some do not care to do anything. They are content to hide in a

crowd. That is dangerous. We must use what we have, or we will lose it.

Let us ask ourselves, "How much can God trust me with? Am I using what He has given me already?"

A few years ago a friend of mine was out in his boat in the Willamette River. The bow was pointed upstream and the motor was running. He thought he was making progress until he looked over at the shore. Then he realized that he was going nowhere. He had been just holding his own against the current.

All at once it came to him that he had been doing the same thing spiritually. He had been merely idling along in his service for the Lord, under-committed, under-involved. Shortly after that he volunteered for a demanding responsibility that was open in the church and went to work for God.

How many of us are like that, just putt-putting along in midstream, keeping up with the current but going nowhere in our Christian discipleship? Love for our Lord demands that we be our best in His service, that we aim at the greatest degree of usefulness both now and forever!

What about the rebellious citizens? While the King is away they seem to be running things their way. Whenever Christian principles gain in public influence, they cry out in alarm, "We will not have this Man to reign over us!"

At present the earth appears to be enemy occupied territory. Believers seem to be like the king's servants among rebellious citizens. But the King is coming and He means business. The rebels will lose. The faithful love-slaves will rule.

How foolish it is to reject the King and His just rule. He is not hard and despotic. His authority is just and right. The right to rule is His, for He alone is able to do so, and thereby to secure the greatest good. He is just and merciful. So let us turn to Him with all our heart, accept His mercy, obey Him in love, and enter into His joy.

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