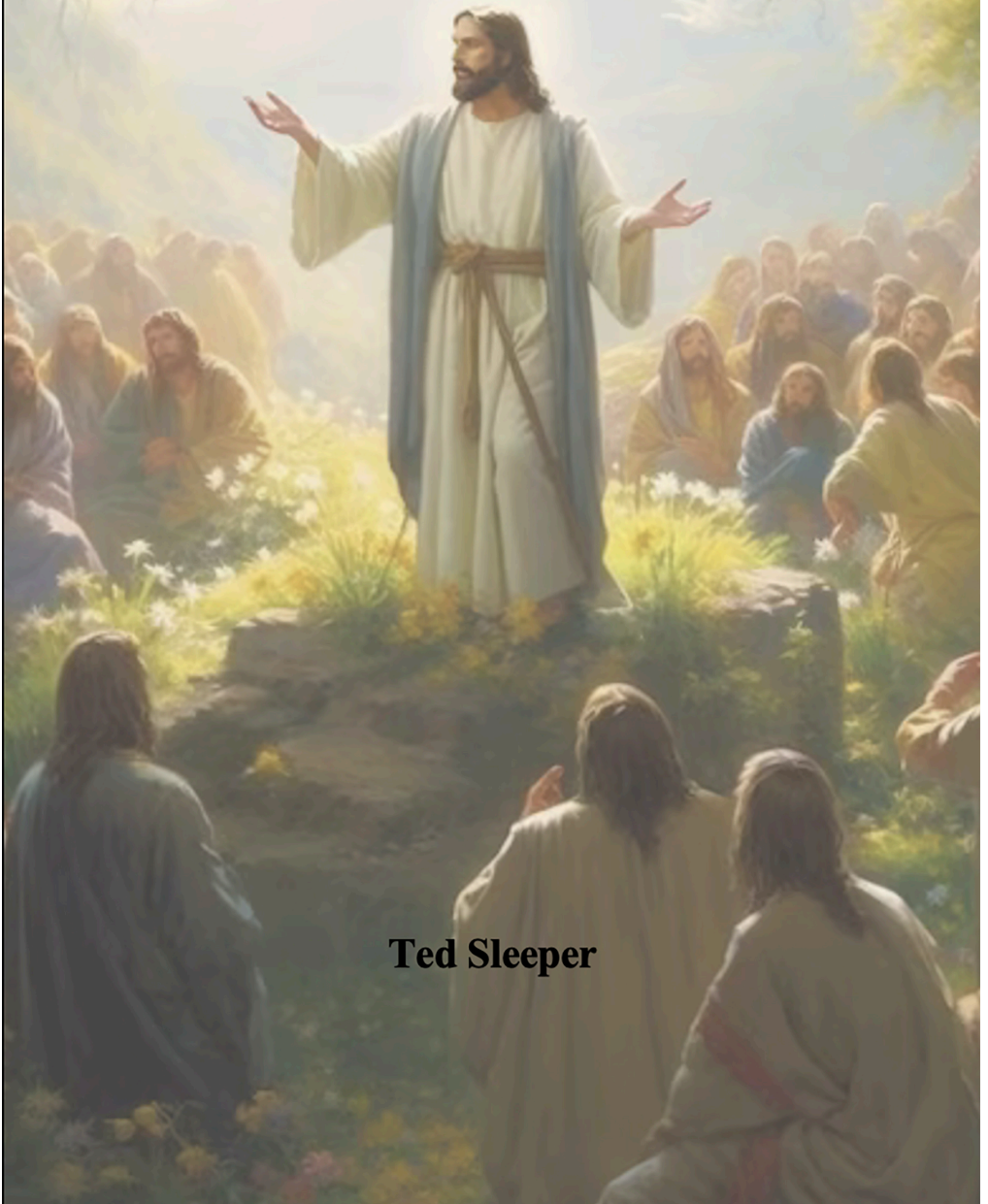


At The Feet of Jesus



Ted Sleeper

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What would it have been like to actually sit and listen to Jesus' preaching? We know from the New Testament record that Jesus liked to tell stories, but these stories were really much more than nice little tales. They were filled with images and warnings drawn from the Old Testament. We call these stories "parables."

In this book it will be our pleasure to sit with these people of Jesus' day and to listen carefully to Jesus' words. I hope the reader will see that these lessons were not just for the people of his day.

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Table of Contents

Chapter One	Parables of Discernment	1
Chapter Two	Parables of Salt and Light	7
Chapter Three	Parables of Meals and Feasts	19
Chapter Four	Parables of The Vineyard	31
Chapter Five	Parables of The Field	39
Chapter Six	Parables of the Household	47

CHAPTER ONE

Parables of Discernment

Introduction

Then his brothers and his mother came, and standing outside they sent to him, calling him. And a multitude was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Look, your mother and your brothers are outside seeking You.” But he answered them, saying, “Who is my mother, or my brothers?” And he looked around in a circle at those who sat about him, and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God is my brother and my sister and mother.” (Mark 3:31-35)

This is a remarkable statement. What were these men and women doing that merited such a blessing? They were simply sitting at the feet of Jesus listening to his teaching, learning from the Master and believing his every word. Like little children, they were wholeheartedly trusting that this man was indeed the Bread of Life (see John 6:28-29).

We too can share in this special privilege of sitting at the feet of Jesus. The purpose of this little book is to provide a place for our Master to speak to us so that we also can listen, learn, and believe.

Several books on parables have previously been written by members of our community. This small book, however, will hopefully enrich and embellish your learning from the previous works. But primarily, I hope you will be drawn to our Master’s instruction to think about what he is telling us, and what response he is seeking from us.

A Word Concerning Parables

Some individuals claim parables are nice little stories meant to teach general moral lessons, the details of which are not really that important.

I hope to dispel this notion and show that Jesus’ parables are the exact opposite: they are pointed, precise warnings, frequently with a first century fulfillment,

making them very real and very urgent to those who initially heard them. I believe that they are very real and urgent for us as well.

On the other side, some, acknowledging the importance of all the details, approach the parables as if they are a kind of crossword puzzle—an intellectual exercise. Nothing in God’s Word should ever be viewed like this. If what we come to understand does not affect us powerfully and personally, then we have not truly understood the message.

We are going to begin our study of parables by pondering several smaller parables that I call “Parables of Discernment.” I hope to illustrate with these little parables what I mean about digging deeper and listening more closely to the Master and then discovering firsthand the remarkable power and insight into ourselves that Jesus’ parables provide. Powerful challenges in truly living the Father’s life are also laid before us in these teachings.

We will see just how important details are in giving a vigorous warning to all disciples, and we will also see how wonderfully Jesus draws from the ordinary to speak to us of the extraordinary.

Parables of Discernment

“Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces” (Matt 7:6).

This little parable seems simple enough, but what is Jesus trying to teach us? How do we make sense of this and thereby find a lesson for ourselves?

In trying to understand what Jesus’ parables mean, considering the context in which the parable is found is often helpful. Here is the context:

Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. And why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove the speck from your eye’; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye. (Matt 7:1-5)

Perhaps surprisingly, the parable we wish to understand is actually the second of two little parables. This proximity suggests Jesus wants us to connect these two parables to fully understand the lessons they contain.

We are reasonably familiar with the first lesson—one man was so highly focused on the minor shortcoming in his brother, that he was totally oblivious to his own

monumental problem. But the first question we must answer is **why** this man was so incapable of assessing the true dimensions of his and his brother's problem.

Perhaps these two passages can help us:

You shall not have in your bag **differing weights, a heavy and a light**. You shall not have in your house differing measures, **a large and a small**. You shall have a perfect and just weight, a perfect and just measure, that your days may be lengthened in the land which the Lord your God is giving you. (Deut 25:13-15)

Diverse weights are an abomination to the Lord, and **dishonest scales** are not good. (Prov 20:23)

We can easily become accustomed to seeing the world around us according to our two standards—one for others and one for ourselves. But the problem goes beyond just the physical; it also extends to the spiritual and moral. “You shall do no injustice in judgment. You shall not be partial to the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty. In righteousness you shall judge your neighbor” (Lev 19:25).

The Law, as a repository of the Divine moral standards, made it possible for a man to weigh up and measure what was in his heart (introspection), so one could see if his deeds sprang from Divine ways... or otherwise. Hence the point of a later verse: “Therefore you shall observe **all** My statutes and **all** My judgments, and perform them: I am the LORD” (Lev 19:37).

Unfortunately, the human desire to be acceptable to God even when we aren't quite following His ways has led His people over time to alter the Divine standard. The Sermon on the Mount was largely concerned with correcting these distortions. These distortions resulted in God's people being incapable of accurately discerning (and therefore judging) rightly between the things of God and the things of man.

We understand the absurdity of a man who, ever so kindly, seeks to remove the “gigantic” speck in his brother's eye, while the plank/beam (a weight-bearing beam!) in his own eye seems so “small” it was barely noticeable.

Absurd? Yes, but the picture is also a strikingly accurate portrayal of the thinking of us humans. In this case, the Pharisees had in their bag two standards: one, a **reduction** of the Divine standard, with which to measure themselves, and a second, an **enlargement**, with which to measure his brother. In our desire to please God, we may not be strangers to this behavior. If we are always in the “right” and our brother always falling short, the outcome of using two standards may be a remarkable **inability** to distinguish between gnats and camels! We may

find ourselves to be “blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!” (Matt 23:24). Right judgment clearly becomes impossible.

But this living by a dual standard (neither of which were Divine) was going to have a far worse ramification: the inability to discern rightly in small matters would inevitably affect the larger things of salvation. This is the reason Jesus now gives his second little parable. Look at it again: “Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces” (Matt 7:6).

To Preach or Not To Preach?

This parable about dogs and swine has often presented a dilemma to us, namely, to whom should we preach? Even a master of Biblical exposition in our community like L.G. Sargent wrestled with this issue in his book, *The Teaching of the Master*.¹

As in the first parable about our eyes, the Old Testament background is essential to understanding this parable as well. Consider these two passages:

No outsider shall eat the holy offering; one who dwells with the priest, or a hired servant, shall not eat the holy thing. (Lev 22:10)

And you shall be holy men to Me: you shall not eat meat torn by beasts in the field; you shall throw it to the dogs. (Exod 22:31)

God, through his servant Moses, declared that holy things were not to be treated as if they were common or unholy things.

What would we think if a priest took the holy showbread and threw it out to his puppies? Or, if a presiding brother took the memorial bread and threw it to his puppies who had been waiting outside in his car? Such actions would suggest a serious inability to distinguish between what was holy and what was common. Yet this is precisely what Israel was about to do. **“That which is holy”** was the Lord Jesus himself and his teaching, the true Bread from Heaven (John 6:41-42). Surely our Lord should have been treated with the utmost care and respect.

“Dogs” as we may well know was understood by the Jews to refer to the Gentiles. Israel might well throw flesh torn in the field to the dogs, but God’s holy food? Yet, this is exactly what the scribes, Pharisees and rulers were in danger of doing: treating God’s Holy One and His Holy Word as if it were refuse fit only for dogs.

¹ L.G. Sargent, *The Teaching of the Master* (Birmingham: The Christadelphian, 1990)

As we well know, when Israel **did** throw away this heavenly food to the Gentile “dogs,” the Gentiles received it eagerly, much to the confusion and dismay of Israel because they had lived a life with two standards for so long. But there was to be an even greater consequence for Israel’s lack of discernment.

You may remember that the manna in the wilderness was described as being round and creamy-white like coriander seeds (Exod 16:31; cf. Num 11:7). In other words, it would have looked like little pearls on the ground. “Your pearls” in Jesus’ little parable refers to the real manna of God who stood before them. Jesus was the Living Word of God, and more precious to God than the manna in the wilderness.

The inability of the rulers to discern between holy and common bread was bad enough in their subsequent treatment of Jesus, but the consequence of their rejection of Jesus was going to have a terrible outcome. In this second parable, “before swine” seems to refer to the Gentiles again, but swine feed on refuse, corn husks; pearls have never been noted as a particularly tasty treat for swine. One might honestly have difficulty discerning holy bread from common, but who would confuse a bag of pearls with a bag of corn? This observation suggests that Jesus was putting before them the difference between Israel’s reception of Jesus **before** his resurrection when such confusion was excusable, and Israel’s reception of Jesus **after** his resurrection when the Power of God had clearly marked him out as God’s Son.

The problem that consequently developed in Israel was not going to be just an inability to discern what was holy and what was not, but an utter **disdain** for God’s Living Word, “this **light** bread” as Israel called it when they complained to Moses (Num 21:4-6).

“Beware,” warns Jesus, if you throw away God’s bread to the Gentiles, “lest they turn and trample the pearls under foot and tear **you** in pieces.” Sadly, AD 70 was the painful witness that Israel never took heed to this warning.

How to Understand Jesus’ Parables

When we look more deeply into what Jesus was saying and what he was trying to teach God’s people, what we can discover is truly amazing. In this context the Law God gave to Moses helps us greatly to see the bigger and deeper issues he addressed.

Context and Old Testament connections are going to be important tools for us to use in understanding the message of Jesus’ parables.

“**He who has ears to hear, let him hear!**” And the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” He answered and

AT THE FEET OF JESUS

said to them, “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 will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him.” (Matt 13:9-12)

Note the parallelism:

He who has ears to hear...	Hear what? Has what? Jesus wants his followers to hear God and listen intently to Him in the Old Testament.
For whoever has...	
let him hear	To those who do listen diligently to the Father, more divine instruction and understanding will be now given through the Son.
more will be given	

This is Jesus’ promise to us as well. The New Testament doesn’t replace the Old Testament, rather, it expounds it so we will more fully understand God’s ways.

CHAPTER TWO

Parables of Salt and Light

*You are the **salt** of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men.*

*You are the **light** of the world. A **city that is set on a hill** cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a **lamp** and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matt 5:13-16)*

Preliminary Observations

If you were a Jew in the first century, with what would you associate these four elements: salt, light, city on a hill, lamp? Most would immediately associate these with the Temple and its ceremonies in Jerusalem.

Salt	Required for temple grain offerings.
Light	The light of God's glory that once shone in the temple.
City on a hill	Jerusalem, the location of the temple.
Lamp	The seven-branched lampstand.

The temple and the objects associated with worship in the temple is the apparent background around which Jesus now forms these parables.

Secondly, note that in each case the item mentioned must demonstrate its distinctive quality or function or be considered useless:

- Salt that loses its flavor is good for nothing.
- Light that fails to shine is useless.
- A hidden city cannot easily be found.
- A concealed lamp is not being used for its designed purpose.

Keep these associations in mind as we look at the parable about “salt” and the parables about “light.”

The Parable of Salt

What does “salt” represent in the Bible? Think of its qualities: real salt retains its particular flavor and is used frequently as a preservative. Consider in this context these Old Testament passages:

Every offering of your grain offering you shall season with salt; you shall not allow the salt of the covenant of your God to be lacking from your grain offering. With all your offerings you shall offer salt. (Lev 2:13)

All the heave offerings of the holy things, which the children of Israel offer to the Lord, I have given to you and your sons and daughters with you as an ordinance forever; it is a covenant of salt forever before the Lord with you and your descendants with you. (Num 18:19)

Should you not know that the Lord God of Israel gave the dominion over Israel to David forever, to him and his sons, by a covenant of salt? (2 Chr 13:5)

Now ponder what God is seeking to teach us through these passages. Salt represents that which is stable, lasting, dependable. It preserves from decay.

The “covenant of salt” speaks of God’s faithfulness to His covenant with Israel. He could be depended on to preserve what He had promised Israel and had promised David.

Salt had to be added to the worshipper’s offerings on God’s altar. This would remind the worshipper that **their** faithfulness to their covenant with God must be found in them. In other words, the worshipper’s dependability to do what he or she has promised God must be reflected in their offering. What was true for the people of God then, is still true for God’s people today.

With this Old Testament background in mind, let us now examine Jesus’ words, “You are the salt of the earth.” Consider for a moment this passage:

Then the men of the city said to Elisha, “Please notice, the situation of this city is pleasant, as my lord sees; but the water is bad, and the ground barren.” And he said, “Bring me a new bowl, and put salt in it.” So they brought it to him. Then he went out to the source of the water, and cast in the salt there, and said, “Thus says the Lord: ‘I have healed this water; from it there shall be no more death or barrenness.’” So the water remains healed to this day, according to the word of Elisha which he spoke. (2 Kgs 2:19-22)

This strongly suggests that our faithfulness and fidelity to God and His Son can bring healing into this world.

Now think about where the salt of which Jesus spoke came from. The salt used in the Temple was gathered from the Dead Sea area. But, it had a problem. This “salt” was really “salts,” a mixture of salt as we know it (table salt or sodium chloride), and other largely tasteless minerals. Moisture over time would leach out the true salt and leave a largely tasteless residue with all the outward appearance of real salt but lacking in its distinctive taste.

This lesson is fairly transparent once we are led by its usage in the Old Testament. When we let our fidelity to God and His Son gradually ebb away, we lose our usefulness to God. The salt that lost its “savor” no longer represents the attributes of faithfulness and preservation that God wants in us. In the temple, the priests would “cast out” the useless “salt” on the ground where they slaughtered the animals so they wouldn’t slip and slide in the blood.

Do you now see Jesus’ warning? If we lose our faithfulness and fidelity to God, the end result will be a casting away by God. Does this sound similar to the outcome of pearls cast before the swine? Once again Jesus is warning the people in his day what will happen to them when they cease to carry that distinctive “taste” within them. We, too, need to heed this warning.

The Parables of Light

Let us consider now what “light” represents in Jesus’ parables. In practical terms, light does make it possible to gain knowledge and develop understanding. What we cannot see, we cannot really know or understand. But, is “light” a symbol for knowledge and understanding?

Follow carefully what John says in John 1:4.

In Him was life...”	In whom was life to be found? We know the answer well: Jesus is the Living Word of God. (John 1:6-14)
“In Him was life ...”	What life was seen in God’s Living Word? Simple answer? God’s Life, that is, God’s way of life is found in God’s Written and Living Word.

What, then, does “light” represent in Scripture? God’s way of life is “The Light of Men.”

If God’s Light is His Way of Life that shines in this world, then we must determine how we see and learn about this life.

AT THE FEET OF JESUS

That which was from the beginning, which we have **heard**, which we have **seen** with our eyes, which we have **looked upon**, and our hands have **handled**, concerning the Word of life—the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us. (1 John 1:1-2)

This Life, God's Way of Life, is found in Christ Jesus. Through Jesus' ministry the disciples "saw" and "heard" about God's life. In Jesus' crucifixion they "looked upon" the kind of sacrificial life they would be called to live; and in his resurrection they "handled him" who was now alive forever more. Truly, in Jesus' words and deeds, the Life of God—the only life that is eternal—shone forth in purity and brilliance, flooding the darkness that prevailed among men, especially among God's own people: "For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in **the face of Jesus Christ**." (2 Cor 4:6)

This is the light of the "glory of God". Thus, the True Life of God (Jesus) is The Light of The World.

Then Jesus cried out and said, "He who believes in me, believes not in me but in Him who sent me. And he who sees me sees Him who sent me. I have come as a light into the world, that whoever believes in me should not abide in darkness. (John 12:44-46)

Hopefully, we can now see that "**light**" is the divine symbol for **God's way of Life**.

Turn now to John where we can begin to clarify the purpose of this "light":

And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God. (John 3:19-21)

God's Light, by its very nature, exposes and reveals. When people are confronted with the teaching and life of Christ, their innermost thoughts and motives are exposed. During Jesus' ministry, time and time again Jesus did this very thing. He exposed the real motives and principles behind people's actions, while at the same time demonstrating what the true and heavenly motives and principles ought to be (e.g., Matt 5:20-48; 6:1-18; Matt 23; Mark 7).

People who already valued these heavenly principles and ways, rejoiced in the Light of God that shone from Christ. Those who valued earthly, fleshly principles, hated the Light and sought first to escape it, and then to destroy it.

An important note to add however, is that the spiritual light of which Scripture speaks is **not** a light that shines forth solely from Jesus' deeds. Jesus' life can show us an outward pattern of living, but not the internal principles that create that pattern. The Christian life can be imitated (e.g., Matt 7:22). Even the Pharisees appeared righteous, yet when the true test came to them, their real motivation was revealed. The thinking behind their behavior was only the ways of the flesh. Simply put: good works do **not** constitute the life of faith; rather, good works are the product or outcome of such a life.

We have seen that "light" is not a symbol for knowledge and understanding. Rather, it refers to God's way of life. This "light" was seen very clearly in the way the Lord Jesus lived his life. He was truly God's Life shining into the lives of all around him. Being light, by its very nature, also requires **teaching** the principles and the ways that generate God's way of life, as well as **living** according to those principles and ways.

"You Are The Light of The World"

We are now ready to look at the first little parable Jesus gives us about light:

You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matt 5:14-16)

Jesus, as we have seen, was the true light shining in the world during his ministry (John 9:4-5), but what would happen when God's Light **left** the world? Consider Jesus' warning to his disciples: "'While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.' These things Jesus spoke, and departed, and was hidden from them" (John 12:36).

Jesus evidently expected his disciples to now become the "sons of light" and that through them God would continue to manifest His Light in the world. Now, follow Paul's thought in his letter to the Philippians, and notice especially what it means to be the "Light of the World":

Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain. (Phil 2:14-16)

In the midst of a "crooked and perverse generation" Paul expected God's sons and daughters to "shine as lights in the world." Their **behavior** must be "blameless" (no inconsistency in their conduct); "harmless" (having no mixture

AT THE FEET OF JESUS

of behaviors, pure), and “without rebuke” (without any moral blemish or stain). Anything less would tarnish the Word of the Life which they were to preach.

Consider Paul’s counsel to the Ephesians:

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret. But all things that are exposed are made manifest by the light, for whatever makes manifest is light. (Eph 5:7-13)

Here, Paul strongly encourages these disciples to be like their Master, exposing the unfruitful works of darkness by their teaching and their behavior.

What can we learn from all of this? “You are the light of the world” can only be true insofar as the disciples of the Lord Jesus fulfill this function by teaching the Word of Life fearlessly and persistently, and, in living blameless and pure lives, without moral blemish or stain clouding their Light. This is indeed a high calling, but Jesus adds something more.

“A City Set On A Hill”

After declaring his followers are to be the light of the world, Jesus adds, “A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.” The allusion to Jerusalem was transparent, especially with the ancient temple built by Solomon (and rebuilt in Nehemiah’s days) sitting high up on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem. Herod had greatly embellished this temple making it one of the wonders of the world. Its glory and beauty (it literally glistened in the sun), drew all the peoples of the earth to see it.

This, Jesus was saying, is to be the destiny of the ecclesia formed through his sacrifice; **they** were destined to be God’s witnesses to the world—a distinct people, dedicated to God, a Holy Community. In fact in the book of Revelations, this community is called the “New Jerusalem,” the real replacement for the temple of stone (Rev. 3:12).

With this allusion Jesus seems to be shifting the focus concerning this parable about Light. Teaching the Word of Life is a challenge, but not that difficult; in contrast, living that Word would present an altogether different and more serious challenge to the ecclesia of God.

Just like a city set on a hill cannot be hid, even so would his disciples, by virtue of their very public preaching and teaching of the gospel, be wide open to the scrutiny of the same public. It is a lesson we also must take in for we, too, cannot

be hidden. To carry home the urgency of this lesson, Jesus now sets out another parable about a lamp in a house.

“Men Light A Lamp... (To Give) Light To All In The House”

Jesus continued his teaching: “Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are **in the house**” (Matt 5:15).

A lamp produces its light by the combustion of well-beaten oil drawn from the reservoir of the lamp. So, too, does our Lord expect his disciples to use God’s Word to manifest His Ways, to allow his principles—his life—to shine brightly before us to help direct our conduct and lifestyle. Recall David’s words: “Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a Light to my path.” (Psa 119:105).

While this is the general flavor of this parable, there are a number of startling details that, when noticed, draw us to the powerful warning our Lord would lay before us.

First notice that the purpose of a lamp is to give light to all “in the house.” This lamp was not meant to illuminate the road or the people outside; it was for those who lived **inside** the house (cf. Luke 8:16-18).

Now the closing words take on an extraordinary significance: “Let your light shine **before** men”—not “**for**” men! That is, the Light of God’s Life must shine brightly **inside** God’s house through the diligent teaching of His Word, and in that light our good works towards each other will be seen. Paul echoed this: “as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, **especially to those who are of the household of faith**” (Gal 6:10). And, says Jesus, when those outside see the Godly behavior of those inside the House, they will be led to “**glorify your Father who is in heaven.**”

We know well the Scriptures about this:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. **By this all will know that you are My disciples**, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34-35)

Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, **by your good works which they observe**, glorify God in the day of visitation. (1 Pet 2:11-12)

AT THE FEET OF JESUS

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, **we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age...**

... who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for himself his own special people, **zealous for good works.**

This is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed in **God should be careful to maintain good works.** These things are good and profitable to men. (Titus 2:11-12,14; 3:8)

Jesus wants God's Life to shine brightly not only from what we teach, but also from our behavior towards each other. Our love for each other should reflect and be consistent with this Life we preach because the whole world will be watching!

Did you also notice that Jesus said that the result of our conduct would lead people to glorify God?

"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matt 5:16).

What is the implication? People should see in Jesus' disciples **family** characteristics!

The Lamp Under The Basket

We now come to one final observation concerning the words of Jesus: "Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house" (Matt 5:15).

A poor man often had no table, only an upturned measure (basket) on which to place his lamp. This poor man put the lamp **under** the basket. We may well wonder why any sane man would do this. And, why would Jesus even mention this possibility? Did this man put the lamp under the bushel out of **shame** for what he saw going on inside the house?

What **do** people see when they gaze into the windows of God's household today? **Are** people led to glorify God, or is His Name blasphemed among the Gentiles because of our behavior? Perhaps they don't see anything because we are too ashamed to put the Lamp of God's light on the table. We may have difficulty looking at our history as a community and not feeling a sense of shame. Whether we like it or not, we **are** the light of the world and we **cannot** be hidden.

Yet, the whole point of a lamp is to reveal things that are hidden and to open to full view things that have been concealed from others. This is actually both

helpful and hopeful: helpful because one can see what should be, and hopeful because evil practices in the Father's house cannot long continue hidden.

In Luke's account of this little parable, we see this helpful and hopeful side of the light:

No one, when he has lit a lamp, covers it with a vessel or puts it under a bed, but sets it on a lampstand, that those who enter may see the light.
For nothing is secret that will not be revealed, nor anything hidden that will not be known and come to light. (Luke 8:16-17)

So, we must not be afraid to let the light of God's ways shine through our teaching in the ecclesial house. Only when things are revealed can they be corrected.

"For with you is the fountain of life; In **Your** light we see light" (Psa 36:9).

The Parable of The Eye

God gives us two very special gifts. One of these is **light**. We can appreciate this especially when we think of Jesus as "The Light of the World." But to a blind man, this light of God's ways has little personal value. He doesn't have the capacity to utilize this light to find his way or to see the path in front of him. So, God's second great gift to men is **sight**. But with these two gifts comes a personal responsibility that Jesus now addresses in another parable concerning our "eyes."

The lamp of the body is the eye. Therefore, when your eye is good, your whole body also is full of light. But when your eye is bad, your body also is full of darkness. Therefore take heed that the light which is in you is not darkness. If then your whole body is full of light, having no part dark, the whole body will be full of light, as when the bright shining of a lamp gives you light. (Luke 11:34-36)

Notice how this parable follows from the parable about the lamp. Here, the "eye" is called the "lamp" of the body. Just as a lamp provides light inside a house, so the eye, in letting light into the body, provides light inside the body. "For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (2 Cor 4:6).

When we let God's Light ("the glory of God"—His Ways) into us, it illuminates our hearts, exposing **our** thinking and motives, revealing **our** innermost thoughts and intents: "For the word of God... is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account." (Heb 4:12-13).

AT THE FEET OF JESUS

Just as men responded differently to The Light of the World, even so can Jesus' disciples react differently to this inward, God-centered examination of our hearts.

And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God. (John 3:19-21)

Some disciples, with deep thankfulness, welcome the Divine exposure, as well, the all-too-frequent spring cleaning it may require:

When your eye is good (healthy), your whole body is full of light. And if, your whole body is full of light, having no part dark, **the whole body will be full of light**, as when the bright shining of a lamp gives you light. (Luke 11:34-36)

Such disciples hide nothing from God. Indeed they have a positive eagerness to be searched out because they know that only in the revealing of weakness and sin within is there Divine cleansing and the possibility of change. Theirs is the spirit of David who wrote: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties (troubling thoughts); and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." (Psa 139:23-24).

But what do you do if "your eye is bad"? There is an Old Testament context to this phrase which can help our understanding:

The sensitive and very refined man among you will be hostile (literally, **his eye shall be evil**) toward his brother, toward the wife of his bosom, and toward the rest of his children whom he leaves behind, so that he will not give any of them the flesh of his children whom he will eat, because he has nothing left in the siege and desperate straits in which your enemy shall distress you at all your gates. (Deut 28:54-55)

Beware lest there be a wicked thought in your heart, saying, "The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand," and **your eye be evil** against your poor brother and you give him nothing, and he cry out to the Lord against you, and it become sin among you. (Deut 15:9)

A man with an **evil eye** hastens after riches, and does not consider that poverty will come upon him. (Prov 28:22)

Do not eat the bread of a miser (literally, one who has an evil eye), nor desire his delicacies; For as he thinks in his heart, so is he. "Eat and drink!" he says to you, but his heart is not with you. (Prov 23:6-7)

Notice how self-interest shuts off all compassion and pity. An evil eye is an eye always looking for what will satisfy or preserve one's self: **selfishness** is the rule

of life. Contrast the “good eye”: “He who has a generous (good) eye will be blessed, for he gives of his bread to the poor.” (Prov 22:9).

A good eye is not clouded by self-interest. Generosity and kindness prevail, and selflessness is the rule of his or her life. Now notice the context of the Matthew 6 parable:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matt 6:19-21)

Where our treasure is tells a lot about our eyes! Jesus warns his disciples against the pursuit of earthly treasures lest the resulting selfishness and self-interest damage our eyes. As one writer has observed, “an evil eye results from an attachment to earthly treasure which corrupts the spirit and blinds the heart.”²

When darkness prevails in our minds, the powers of introspection become stifled and in time atrophy; evil motives go unchecked, simply because they are not seen (discerned). Such darkness makes it possible for one to “hate his brother” and not realize it:

He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now. He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him. But he who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes. (1 John 2:9-11)

Isaiah also speaks of brethren hating each other:

Hear the word of the Lord, you who tremble at His word: “Your brethren who hated you, who cast you out for My name’s sake, said, ‘Let the Lord be glorified, that we may see your joy.’ but they shall be ashamed.” (Isa 66:5)

Their hatred was to them simply “zeal for the LORD of Hosts.” Truly, as our Master told us, “When [the eye] is bad, your whole body is full of darkness.” And, Jesus adds significantly, “If the light that is in you is darkness, **how great is the darkness!**”

There is, however, something more to be found in this little parable of Jesus. Consider the implications of this Scripture when applied to this parable. Paul

² L.G. Sargent, *The Teaching of The Master* (Birmingham: The Christadelphian, 1990), pg. 210

AT THE FEET OF JESUS

writes: “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’ (1 Cor 12:21).

I suggest the “eyes” of Christ’s body are those who labor to expound God’s Word to the body.

Here then is another warning from Jesus: We must be open to the searching and purifying introspection of God’s Light, His Thoughts and Ways. We must also be alert that those who minister to us God’s Word are not themselves blinded by self-interest, thereby altering the message. The result of this blindness will be darkness in God’s house. And how great, indeed, will be that darkness!

For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.
(2 Tim 4:3 NIV)

CHAPTER THREE

Parables of Meals and Feasts

The Two Parables (Luke and Matthew)

Read carefully through both these parables so you can be familiar with the details:

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 am going 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)

The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who arranged 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

AT THE FEET OF JESUS

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.” (Matt 22:1-14)

These two parables are quite similar in intent and content, but with this difference: Matthew’s parable comes at the very **end** of Jesus’ ministry when the rulers and leading men had hardened in their rejection of Jesus’ claims. Consequently, Matthew’s parable includes the theme of judgment and punishment largely lacking from the parable in Luke.

Matthew’s parable is also more specific about the great dinner; this is **not** just an ordinary feast. This dinner is the king’s marriage feast for his son! Thus the seriousness of the rejection of the invitation and the subsequent consequences are intensified over Luke’s parable where the emphasis is more on the filling of the house with replacement guests.

The Marriage Feast

Understanding exactly what Jesus had in mind when he spoke of a marriage feast is not difficult, but it is quite important for a full appreciation of these parables that we all come to the same understanding. First note that in both parables, the story essentially ends at the point when the feast/dinner table is filled with sufficient guests—**not** with the commencement of the actual meal. This is pointed out because it removes a difficulty some have found with the next suggestion.

What exactly does this great dinner or marriage feast represent? One clue is given prior to the parable in Luke when one of the dinner guests, in seeking to steer the conversation to a less tense topic, exclaimed: “Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the Kingdom of God!” (Luke 14:15). This statement formed the core context of the parable in Luke. Another clue is clearly given in Matthew’s parable: “a King... gave a **marriage feast** for His Son.”

Now consider this passage of Scripture:

“Let us be glad and rejoice and give him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his wife **has made** herself ready.” And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints [their acts of faith, e.g., Hebrews 11, a garment of great beauty in God’s sight indeed].

Then he said to me, “Write: ‘Blessed are those who are called [literally, *who have **already been called**—perfect tense*] to the marriage supper of the Lamb!’” And he said to me, “These are the true sayings of God.”
(Rev 19:7-9)

What can we conclude from the above passages? The great feast and the marriage supper are one and the same event: they **both** refer to that wonderful feast of fellowship and eternal blessing to be shared with the Lord Jesus when Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and all the faithful shall sit down with him in the Kingdom of God. (See also: Isa 25:6-8; Matt 8:11-12; Matt 26:29; Luke 13:29; Luke 22:29-30).

The Details

Consider first the details of the parable in Luke. The “certain man” is clearly referring to God as the “great supper” is, as we saw in the last section, a reference to the meal of eternal fellowship in the Kingdom of God, the time of divine blessing and life.

The original invitees to this supper were God’s chosen people, Israel. They were specially privileged indeed to be called first to eat bread with God in His Kingdom. This is the invitation that was issued by John, but especially by Jesus, **the** Servant of the LORD: “The Kingdom of God is at hand!”

The message this time is much stronger than during Jesus’ ministry because **now** “all things are ready.” The foundation of the Kingdom was laid in the sacrifice of Christ and from that moment forward all was ready, the time had now arrived for those invited to enter the Promised Rest. Through Jesus’ apostles, the call went out: “Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, in the day of trial in the wilderness,” (Heb 3:7-8).

And their response? They “all” began to make excuses! The nation refused the Kingdom for their present life, Caesar over Christ, Rome over the New Jerusalem, the present world over the one to come. One wonders, did they really have any interest in going to the marriage feast, that is, in entering into God’s Kingdom, in the first place? Who accepts an invitation and then plans their affairs so they can’t go? Clearly, the pleasures of buying and selling, marrying and giving in marriage—in short, the temporal, perishing life of this present world—had become of greater value to God’s people than the future blessings of God’s table and fellowship. No greater affront to the love and provision of God can be imagined.

And yet, can we honestly say we are free from this same danger, that is, choosing the cares and pleasures of this life over the Kingdom of God?

AT THE FEET OF JESUS

Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called “Today,” lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. (Heb 3:12-13)

We are told that the householder (God) was angry. Could such evil behavior provoke anything else? They had rejected the gospel invitation, so now God rejected them: “For I say to you, **none** of those men who were invited shall taste my supper!”

Your fathers tested Me, tried Me, and saw My works forty years. Therefore I was angry with that generation, and said, “They always go astray in their heart, and they have not known My ways.” So I swore in My wrath, “They shall not enter My rest.” (Heb. 3:9-11)

His servants are now commanded to go out into the streets and lanes of the city to find those who had little to nothing—the poor, the maimed, the halt, the blind. They were to search for those among God’s people (“**in** the city”) who, deeply conscious of their own need and condition, would not fail to receive with gladness and great joy the kindness now offered to them!

And yet there was still room. Why? Because in God’s house and at His table there are “many rooms” (John 14:2 ESV—literally, “*many places to abide*”), more than enough for all that are called.

So the servants are now sent to the highways and byways outside the city³. This is where the stranger and the Gentiles would most likely be found in their travels.

“Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!” (Luke 14:15). “Many will come from the east and west, and sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be **cast out...**” (Matt 8:11-12). What the Jews would not have, the Gentiles received with great gladness.

Jesus uses a surprising word in his parable. The servants were to “compel” people to come in. The word means to put constraint upon, to constrain by persuasion or force. One can hardly imagine the servants brandishing swords before every passerby, but neither must we imagine them sitting quietly in some small, obscure corner apologetically seeking to gain some traveler’s attention. Sadly, as a community, we have been known to do both.

³ The meaning of the two words Jesus uses would suggest roads and paths that were separated from the ordinary pathways within a town. Hence the suggestion that these were outside the city.

Consider, then, what the servants would have to do. First, they would have to go out where the people would be found. It would be utterly futile to shout out the invitation from the Master's house. Second, they would have to be **forceful and bold** in their invitation; they would have to **disrupt** the preoccupation of those travelling along the road and then apply all their powers of persuasion and forceful argument to convince the traveler that this invitation was of far greater value than continuing in his or her present course.

God would have all kinds of men and women be saved and come to the knowledge of the Faith that His house might be filled. But—and mark these words—it is **his servants** who have been charged with fulfilling this desire. Yes, Jesus is “**the servant**” in this parable, but so are all those who have been baptized into Christ: they have become part of the One Servant of Yahweh.

More Details

A few more details can be found in a subsequent parable that was specially crafted to confront the later flagrant and open rejection of the King and His son by the religious and secular leaders of Israel.

The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who arranged 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. (Matt 22:2-10)

Notice that in this parable, there are **three** sets of servants this time (Matt 22:3, 4, 8). The reference to the first servants most likely refers to the work of John and Jesus together. Notice how Jesus acknowledges with sadness the failure of this work: “they were **not willing** to come” **rather than** “they didn’t want to come.” “How often,” said Jesus, “would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you **would not!**” (Matt 23:37).

The second set of servants would seem to refer to the Apostles because they were the ones sent specifically to Israel: “Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and

AT THE FEET OF JESUS

do not enter a city of the Samaritans. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel..." (Matt 10:5-7).

Sadly, at this later time after the resurrection and evidence of Holy Spirit gifts by the Apostles, God's people gave the call no better reception: "They made light of it," which literally means **they didn't care**. They treated the invitation of the King of Heaven with the same contempt they subsequently treated His servants: "they seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them." In plainer language Jesus prophesied:

Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. (Matt 23:34-35)

This was not just a refusal by "the rest" to come as in the first instance, but undisguised contempt for the King of Heaven Himself. Paul very aptly sums up their behavior:

Who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men, forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost. (1 Thess 2:15-16)

Such flagrant evil behavior from His citizens could evoke only one righteous response from the King: "wrath has come upon them to the uttermost." So, in AD 70 God "sent out his armies (the Romans), destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city" as Jesus had prophesied.

The third set of servants refers to the disciples of Jesus in every generation. When the citizens of God's Kingdom rejected and despised the gospel invitation, the void at the marriage feast had to be filled, so more servants were now sent out, but this time to the "highways" (literally, the "parting of the ways" or crossroads of His dominion). In simple terms, they went to the Gentiles.

But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul. Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles." (Acts 13:45-46; see also 18:5-6; 28:23-28)

From the Gentiles God would call out a People for His name... and for His son's marriage feast.

What a remarkable command was given to this third set of servants. They were to gather together **all kinds** of men and women regardless of their moral character or manner of life: the pure and the prostitute, the clean and the unclean, the righteous and the sinner. And so Jesus puts to rest once and for all the determined belief of some that only the good and the perfect should be invited, as well as the conviction of others that only the good and perfect can be invited.

This is possible because all, regardless of the state in which they were found when given the gospel invitation, were given a wedding garment by the king to cover their former appearance; all received the same blessed covering.

But sadly, not all who were given this garment to clothe their former state, saw the necessity for it: “Surely my fine garments are perfectly acceptable to the king,” they thought. “These others certainly have need of something to cover their shameful appearance, but surely not me!” So, Jesus finishes this parable in Matthew with a warning to those who would presume to sit in fellowship with God convinced of the fine merits of their own good works.

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.” (Matt 22:11-14)

The king coming in to see the result of his servants’ work is clearly a reference to the day of judgment when God will “bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts” (1 Cor 4:5).

The king calls out to one of the invitees whom he calls “friend.” This term was a token of the special relationship with the king brought about by the man’s acceptance of the invitation to the marriage supper.

The man God calls “friend” has no wedding garment on. He must have felt quite certain that God would accept him on his own fine merits. But the king’s response is in effect a resounding “No! Your garments are **not** acceptable here.” Fittingly, the man’s proud presumption before his fellow invitees falls flat, leaving him, literally, speechless.

“Cast him into the outer darkness!” So it will be with all who fail to learn this singular lesson of salvation in Christ: A man is **not** justified before God because of his unimpeachable purity, his superior good works, or his profound self-denial for God or man. A man is justified because of his faith in Christ. For such, their good deeds and humble acts of faith are but the expression of a deep love and thankfulness to God for the salvation He has brought about in their lives.

AT THE FEET OF JESUS

We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified. (Gal 2:15-16)

For the sake of Christ I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own (my own garment), based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith. (Phil 3:8-9)

On a final note, consider an absolutely thrilling picture in Revelation concerning the Lamb's Bride. When the marriage of the Lamb has at last come and his Bride has made herself ready, God grants her to be clothed in a stunning and most surprising Bridal Gown: "To her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the **righteous acts** of the saints" (Rev 19:8).

Do you notice what is missing? Gone is the blood-stained robe she rejoiced in all the days of her mortal life, the covering for sin provided by Jesus' sacrifice. In its place are **her** righteous deeds, those things she did because she believed. God honors and glorifies the Bride of Christ **with her own acts of faith!** Each strand in this simple, yet profoundly beautiful garment represents an act of faith by each saint from every age: Abel's offering, Noah's ark, Abraham's sojournings, Sarah's child, and hopefully our own. It is an absolutely thrilling Bridal gown that God grants her: a fit garment to enhance a beauty that will never fade; to enhance the high honor in which her husband will forever hold her.

Giving A Dinner

When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbors, lest they also invite you back, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just. (Luke 14:12-14)

The first three parables of Luke 14 were given in the house of a chief Pharisee. The circumstances were not exactly conducive to a pleasant repast for these men who had purposely sought an occasion against Jesus regarding the Sabbath laws. Jesus used the occasion to instruct these legalistic minds in Divine principles they had forgotten. The first parable was addressed to those who were invited; the second was directed to the host. We will look at this second parable first.

Note the word "when" (i.e., whenever). Jesus is not here concerned with the marriage supper of the Kingdom, but with meals of fellowship at which one

might sit down with friends or brethren. The counterpart in our spiritual lives is fairly straightforward: it corresponds to our meals of fellowship at our Breaking of Bread services, our gatherings, Day with the Word studies, our Bible Schools and similar times we come together. Here is ministered the heavenly food of God's Word for the nourishment and sustenance of all those who have come to share in this fellowship.

So, who **do** we invite to these special gatherings? Jesus calls them our "friends," that is, those among the brethren with whom we are especially friendly: those who enjoy vigorous and stimulating Bible study. Next he adds, "brothers," those in our own ecclesia, then "relatives," those in other, neighboring ecclesias. Finally he mentions our "rich neighbors," those from other ecclesias who are especially blessed and capable, who can on their own contribute greatly to our spiritual meals.

What is the problem with inviting these brethren to our gatherings? Harry Whittaker once observed, all of these "are able to make a spiritual return for the fellowship and ministration of the Word which they themselves enjoy."⁴ In other words, this kind of fellowship and Bible study activity really only ministers to our **own** spiritual needs.

This, I believe, is what Jesus has in mind. Consequently, Jesus instructs his disciples to invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: Jesus understood very well the implications of these words because his whole life had been dedicated to bringing the hope of salvation to these very people!

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed. (Luke 4:18)

There are people all around us whose moral and spiritual condition cries out for the nourishing, healing and redemptive power of the gospel. When was the last time we prepared and organized our weekly Bible studies, our weekends with the Word, even our Bible Schools for them?

In Guyana, the brethren used to have week-long Bible preaching campaigns in which the mornings were given over to Bible study, and the afternoons and evenings were devoted to preaching activities. Perhaps we might explore the possibility of doing this in our area. This is the challenge our Master puts before us in his parable. Here is a call to match the explosion of new Bible Schools with an equal explosion in preaching and public teaching activities. "You will be

⁴ Harry Whittaker's books can be found here <https://bibliabooks.org.uk/harry-whittaker-books/>

blessed,” says Jesus, when you share God’s word with those who desperately need it. So, the challenge remains: “when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind.”

The man who is poor, but made rich through the great and precious promises of God, can never repay us for what he has received. The maimed and the lame who once had only weak and useless limbs and now mount up with wings like eagles because they have learned to wait on the LORD—there is nothing they can ever return to us for so great a blessing. And the blind man who now sees can never repay us with something equal to this priceless gift.

Jesus tells his disciples that the place where we will be recompensed for these labors of love will be at the resurrection of the just. Then, says Jesus, we will be recompensed with a gift for which **we** will never be able to offer adequate return: the gift of life and fellowship with God that will never end.

In light of Jesus’ admonitions, ought we ever to have Bible feasts for each other? The verb he uses is in the present continuous tense; it means “do not **keep on calling.**” Jesus is not suggesting we should neglect ministering to our brethren, but rather that we shouldn’t keep on doing **only** this. So our labors should include preaching to those in need and inviting them to partake in the blessings of the gospel of God’s grace.

Seating Arrangements at the Master’s Table

He told a parable to those who were invited, when he noted how they chose the best places, saying to them: When you are invited by anyone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in the best place, lest one more honorable than you be invited by him; and he who invited you and him come and say to you, “Give place to this man,” and then you begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down in the lowest place, so that when he who invited you comes he may say to you, “Friend, go up higher.” Then you will have glory in the presence of those who sit at the table with you. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. (Luke 14:7-11)

Background

After decisively answering the Pharisees’ challenge on what is lawful on the Sabbath, Jesus had noticed how the invitees (Pharisees all) jostled each other to take the chief seats. He used this observation as the basis of this parable recorded by Luke. As always, Jesus’ words went far beyond the surface situation, cutting deeply into their innermost convictions and exposing the very origins of the Pharisees’ faulty understanding of their relationship to God.

The final sentence about exalting or humbling oneself is not just a principle of table etiquette, but a fundamental principle of salvation. Compare the Pharisee and the Publican in Jesus' little story recorded earlier in Luke:

Two men went up to the temple to pray, 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." ... 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 18:10-11, 13-14)

The Pharisees' confidence, indeed, the Jews' confidence generally, resided solely in the power of their own flesh. Until that pride was abased, and they, like the Publican, acknowledged their desperate need for salvation, no basis for their redemption existed.

It was this lesson that God's people would only finally learn when they, "the first," were made last, and the Gentiles, "the last," were made first. Then would His people, provoked to fury and jealousy, learn the great lesson: he who would "walk with God" must first humble himself before God.

Do not exalt yourself in the presence of the king, and do not stand in the place of the great; For it is better that he say to you, "Come up here," than that you should be put lower in the presence of the prince, whom your eyes have seen. (Prov 25:6-7)

The Details

This parable is about a wedding or marriage supper. This suggests that Jesus has in mind again the marriage supper of the Lamb hosted by the Lord of this feast, God himself. In this parable he is illustrating what happens when we presume that our racial descent, our privileged relationship with God, or even our ritual (external) righteousness earns us the most honored position in the kingdom of God. God is seeking in us an **attitude of mind**: he who would be first, must be servant of all.

In the first century, the subservience of the highly educated Jewish rulers and leaders in the synagogue to the Apostles who they saw as "ignorant and unlearned" called for humility indeed. "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marveled; and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13).

Likewise, the Jewish people had to eventually recognize and accept the well-deserved chastisement of their God in the exaltation of the Gentiles to greater privilege in Christ than they ever enjoyed through Moses. When this lesson is fully and finally learned, **then** God's people will at last be made the first, the head of all nations!

And it shall come to pass, if thou shalt hearken diligently unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to observe and to do all his commandments which I command thee this day, that **the LORD thy God will set thee on high above all nations** of the earth... And **the LORD shall make thee the head**, and not the tail; and thou shalt be above only, and thou shalt not be beneath... (Deut 28:1, 13)

“Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord. “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the Lord, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the Lord, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.” (Jer 31:31-34)

... the sons of Israel will remain for many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred pillar and without ephod or household idols. Afterward the sons of Israel will return and seek the Lord their God and David their king; and they will come trembling to the Lord and to His goodness in the last days. (Hos 3:4-5)

Thus says the Lord of hosts, “In those days ten men from all the nations will grasp the garment of a Jew, saying, ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.’” (Zech 8:23)

CHAPTER FOUR

Parables of the Vineyard

Parable of the True Vine

For the vineyard of the LORD of Hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are His pleasant plant. He looked for justice, but behold, oppression; for righteousness, but behold, a cry for help. (Isa 5:7)

Israel was called God's vine, but, despite all God's efforts, Israel after the flesh never brought forth the fruit God desired:

My Well-beloved has a vineyard on a very fruitful hill. He dug it up and cleared out its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. He built a tower in its midst, and also made a winepress in it; So He expected it to bring forth good grapes, but it brought forth wild grapes.

And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge, please, between Me and My vineyard. What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why then, when I expected it to bring forth good grapes, did it bring forth wild grapes? (Isa 5:1-4)

The nation of Israel in its failure to do God's will proved only to be an imperfect shadow of the true Israel of God and the true Vine. The real Vine and Israel of God is the man, Christ Jesus: "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser" (John 15:1).

The Vine and The Branches

It is absolutely crucial we understand the words Jesus spoke about being the vine: "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

Jesus says he is the vine. This we have seen, but what this means is the vital part. Jesus is the **entire vine**: root, trunk, and branches. Therefore, "the vine" refers to Jesus alone, **not** Jesus and us; **not** Jesus the root and we the branches. But in this same verse Jesus said **we** are the branches (John 15:5)! Is this a contradiction?

AT THE FEET OF JESUS

No, but the point Jesus is making, I believe, is absolutely critical to our discipleship.

If Jesus is the whole vine it means we only have our identity as a part of him. Branches cannot yield fruit by themselves. Only if the branches are **in** the Vine and partake of the root can they bear. So also with ourselves. Unless we are in Christ (through faith and baptism), bearing fruit is impossible. Jesus said, “without me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

To say the branches bear the fruit is not quite accurate, for apart from the life-giving fluid of the vine, no fruit could ever be produced in the branches. The fruit produced by our being in Christ, then, in reality, comes from Christ, not from ourselves.

The Branches Period

There are two kinds of branches in the Christ-Vine. Those that abide in the Vine receiving the life-giving fluid of the Vine bear fruit; they are alive. Those that are outwardly attached, yet inwardly have allowed the vital connection to the Vine to dry up, fail to produce any fruit; they are dead.

What does this mean in real life? Each kind of branch symbolizes a disciple who has joined themselves **outwardly** to Christ through baptism.

One speaks of a disciple who is also **inwardly** joined to Christ because they allow the life-giving word and teaching of their Master to fill their hearts and minds. In these disciples, the life of Christ flows freely, bringing forth the fruit God desires. “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you” (John 15:7).

The other speaks of a disciple who, though outwardly attached through baptism, has long since abandoned their inward attachment. The life of Christ, his teaching, his commandments no longer “abides” in him or her; that is, Christ is no longer in their thinking or in their hearts.

The Husbandman’s Work

If the branch is bearing, the task of the one caring for the vine is to ensure a high yield. If the branch is dead, it must be removed from the vine and burnt.

Ezekiel put this crucial lesson before us, it is a lesson we must learn again and again:

Son of man, how is the wood of the vine better than any other wood, the vine branch which is among the trees of the forest? Is wood taken from it to make any object? Or can men make a peg from it to hang any vessel on? Instead, it is thrown into the fire for fuel; the fire devours

both ends of it, and its middle is burned. Is it useful for any work? Indeed, when it was whole, no object could be made from it. How much less will it be useful for any work when the fire has devoured it, and it is burned? (Ezek 15:2-5)

The vine is useful for only one thing: to bring forth fruit. If a branch ceases to bear fruit, it ceases to fulfill its sole purpose for existence and its fate as set out in Ezekiel's prophecy is reiterated by Jesus: "If anyone does not abide in me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned" (John 15:6).

Jesus elaborates further concerning the good branches: "Every branch in me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit" (John 15:2).

A wise husbandman "prunes" his vine so that it might bring forth more fruit. This term can indicate two possible actions.

First, "to prune" literally means "to cleanse." It refers to the practice of washing branches with soap and water to clean off any fungus that is sapping the vine's growth.

In this analogy, the fungus refers to the thoughts, attitudes, and values of the world that rub off on us in our day-to-day living and begin to grow and infect our thinking. Such things need to be dealt with quickly and efficiently: our hearts and lives are cleansed through the constant washing of the Word. Jesus told his disciples, "you are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you" (John 15:3).

The other meaning of "prune" is the one most are familiar with where unneeded branches are "pruned" or cut off. The husbandman performs this process on a vine often three times per year. Vines will forever put out useless sprouts, but the good husbandman knows these divert the energy of the branch to useless tasks—the real and only task being to bear grapes. Consequently, the husbandman ruthlessly cuts off these useless diversions.

The picture presented may seem harsh, but it is actually one of encouragement and comfort. Which disciple has not felt the pruning hand of God in their life? Perhaps it was a favorite, but time-consuming hobby He removed, or that special ability denied all outlets for expression. Maybe it was a special job, or even special person, that would only have diverted your life into futility. Did it hurt? Of course! But afterwards, we can be deeply thankful, for in such pruning we have the assurance that God really is at work in us "both to will and to do His good pleasure" (Phil 2:13). His will and good pleasure is that we will bring forth "much fruit."

The Fruit

The life of the vine produces the grape, whose pressed-out blood becomes wine. Jesus' words now provide the parallel between the fruit of the vine and his own life and sacrifice:

Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom." (Matt 26:27-29)

The life-giving fluid of the vine represents the divine principles of the Father's life that formed the basis of Jesus' life of faith and love. "I live by means of the Father" said Jesus (John 6:57). The resulting fruit nourished by the Vine is the result of his faithful life: his sacrificial life that provides the basis for the forgiveness of our sins, and our redemption from sin and death. The wine of the pressed grape is the result of Jesus' sacrifice made available to all through the New Covenant. It is **this** that we taste and remember each week.

But there is a serious problem. If indeed, the fruit represents the outcome of the sacrificial work of our Lord for the salvation of himself and the world, how would the world get an opportunity to share in these wonderful benefits? Forty days after our Lord's resurrection, he ascended into heaven. Jesus did **not** go out again into the world to offer mankind the benefits of his sacrifice! Indeed, the world will not see him again until he comes to set up the Kingdom. How then was his sacrificial work going to be offered to the world? Jesus decisively answers: The branches are to bear this vital responsibility!

The lesson is now complete. Just as the vine circulates its lifeblood through its branches, and this in turn is manifest in the fruit, so too in Christ Jesus. The life work of Jesus—his sacrifice that we sinners might be reconciled to God—was to be offered to the world through his "branches":

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you... (Matt 28:19-20)

Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. (2 Cor 5:18-20)

Clearly, Jesus' disciples were to have a vital, personal role in Jesus' work: they were going to carry the message of redemption and reconciliation to the world. As messengers to this present generation, **we have work to do!**

Summary

If we abide in the Christ-Vine, it is because we **want** to do our Master's will and keep his commandments ("his word" John 15:7). In response, the Father carefully and lovingly tends the branches of this Vine, carefully pruning our lives so that we might bring forth the fruit that so honors Him. The fruit honors Him because it is the replication in ourselves of our Lord's **sacrificial life** in word and deed: "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be my disciples" (John 15:8).

And this is what the fruit will taste like to those around us:

Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. (Col 3:12-15)

Let the purpose of our life's work be to let the sacrificial life and teaching of our Lord be in our hearts and minds always, for this is what we remember at the table of our Lord each week.

Penny A Day

Consider one last parable concerning a vineyard. Jesus had just finished explaining to his disciples who would be in the Kingdom of God. Peter had responded with concern about what they who had left all and followed him would receive. This parable goes right to the heart of Peter's question, exposing an attitude of mind into which Peter was in danger of slipping. As is so often the custom of Jesus, he answers not only the surface question, but also addresses the underlying problem.

Jesus begins by pointing out that "many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Matt 19:30). To emphasize and to explain what this meant, Jesus then begins his little parable about laborers hired to work in a vineyard. Here is how it starts:

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.

AT THE FEET OF JESUS

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.” So 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 one hired us.” He said to them, “You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.” (Matt 20:1-7)

Most readers will be familiar with the strange twist in this parable: the first laborers became very upset when it came time to be paid their daily wage for which they had agreed, and they received the exact same wages as all the other laborers.

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. (Matt 20:8-16)

The key to understanding this parable is in the little words. These men “agreed” to perform the work. They understood that for the work they would perform, they would be given a certain amount. A little later the owner, hoping to persuade more men to work in his vineyard, told them simply they would receive what the owner thought most appropriate. In other words, they had no set wage, they went to work on the basis of their faith in the one who hired them.

When it came time to pay the men for this day’s work, every man received the same wage, a penny, except the first ones received it as an unexpected blessing, the last ones received it as wages due. When the first-hired saw this, they complained about this blatant unfairness. The owner’s response was hard: “Go your way!” In other words, ‘no more work for you, you’re fired!’ What these laborers forgot was that this was only the first day of work, all his workers would continue to be sent into the vineyard until the work was done.

Let’s clear up one misunderstanding: the “penny” is not to be equated with “eternal life.” If it were a symbol for eternal life, then the dismissal creates an

insuperable inconsistency. The penny, then, is simply what Jesus emphasized in his first answer to Peter: it represents God's blessings and goodness for those who serve faithfully in God's vineyard (cf. Matt 19:28).

So why was one group dismissed from God's service? Because they had failed to appreciate a fundamental principle that guided the One whom they served: they sought to **earn** God's blessings by what they had agreed to do, while their fellow servants, in the same field, doing the same work, **labored by faith** in the goodness of the One who called them.

Though there would be hard labor aplenty in the following days of harvest, those who held on to the Pharisaical attitude that the measure of God's blessing is based on what one does rather than on one's faith in the Giver earned their dismissal from God's service. For the Jewish believers like Peter and Paul, who learned this lesson, they went on to labor with all their might in God's vineyard.

Summary

This is a hard lesson for human nature to learn, but it is an absolutely vital corrective to the strong disposition to believe salvation and blessing come by our great work and efforts.

Remember, then, this fundamental principle of God's salvation and blessing: God wants men and women to do, to act, to serve because they trust Him, not because they can somehow put God in their debt by their hard and determined efforts.

AT THE FEET OF JESUS

CHAPTER FIVE

Parables of The Field

Introduction

Any examination of our Lord's parables would remain incomplete without considering the most familiar of them all—the parable of the Sower in Matthew 13.

The approach which I will undertake will be a bit different from the usual explanation. We will spend a fair amount of time reflecting on the images Jesus places before us. I hope that in this experience, you will begin to see just how deep and rich the instruction is that our Lord has provided for us in the **details** of his parables.

Parable of The Sower and The Field

The first three Gospels all contain this parable, though some details are included in one and not the others. What follows below is based on a combination of these texts: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23; Mark 4:1-9, 13-20; Luke 8:4-8, 11-15.

Basic Interpretation

I believe most readers will be very familiar with this parable and what Jesus is seeking to illustrate by his comparison of hearers to different parts of a field being sown with grain.

One part of the field is hard and impenetrable, representing a mind so hardened that the gospel isn't even given a reception. The ridicule and contempt of God's adversaries easily finishes the work.

Another part of the field has a lot of stones, representing a mind filled with such large obstacles that the germinating seed of the gospel cannot find sufficient soil in which to flourish.

A third part is well-suited and fertile. Here is a mind that receives the Word of God, but, alas, thorns grow up to choke off the emerging heads of grain. For all the life-giving energy expended, the Word of God is never able to develop its fruit.

Happily tough, the final portion of the field is free from all the problems mentioned above. This part of the field of humanity represents a mind which offers good and fertile soil for the gospel. God nurtures and protects the gospel grain and in time it brings forth a welcome harvest.

Why this parable?

Before we look at the details, there is a larger and more immediate question that presses for an answer: Why did our Lord give this parable?

Was it to help his apostles—and us, his later disciples—deal with the discouragement arising from the meager results of their preaching? But this doesn't make sense: the pathway, the rocky soil, and the thorns represent only a very small percentage of the field. And, as we shall see, in the first century the Word of God “grew and multiplied” fantastically in that field. No cause for discouragement is evident here!

Was it given then so that they—and we—could neatly sort out humanity by their responses to our preaching, as if those to whom we preach must fill one of these four roles?

“Joe’s heart, I think, was just too hard to receive the gospel so I didn’t bother much with him. Sarah is gone too. She left the Truth almost as quickly as she embraced it. Just doesn’t seem to be much good soil around these days!”

And so we judge our neighbors and friends, our brothers and sisters, giving up on one here, writing off one there, shaking our heads sadly over another. Have we been around Jesus so long and yet learned so little? Doesn’t Jesus always turn the light **inwards**, directing us to look at our **own** heart and not our brother’s?

Here, then, is the key to this parable: it was given so we could judge ourselves. Here are warnings about our own heart: the effect of influences we allow in or shut out of our hearts, the obstacles to which we obstinately hold fast, and the values and goals and pleasures we seek to nourish, all to the detriment of God’s work in our hearts. Remember, this parable was given to instruct the crowds, not just the Apostles.

If Jesus here gives us power to discern our own hearts, then surely the implication is that he expects us to use this knowledge. We must strive to correct the problem and make our hearts a better place for our Father’s life-generating

Word. With this in mind, let us look at some of the details of this parable with a renewed sense of urgency and hope.

The Seed

A seed is a tiny package of biochemical instructions for the production of a specific form of life. So too is the Word of God. It is designed to produce a specific form of life—God’s Life (“the Life of Christ”):

Having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever, because “All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you. (1 Pet 1:23-25)

And how the seed produced!

Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith. (Acts 6:7)

But the word of God grew and multiplied. (Acts 12:24)

So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed. (Acts 19:20)

Seeing the vitality and power of the gospel in the first century, how utterly distressing and depressing is the realization of what the Parable of the Tares is really telling us about future circumstances. But that is another story to be considered at another time.

The Soil

Soil is vital to the growth of plants, but the soil does **not** produce life. It is the **medium** in which the seed can grow and mature: it does not have any life in itself.

The lesson is really straightforward: we cannot make ourselves sons of the Kingdom! No matter how hard we try, no matter how rigorous our religious dedication and discipline, we will not succeed in reproducing in ourselves the Father’s Life. The Father’s Life is in the Seed. And the power to reproduce that life is in the Seed: “The gospel of Christ... is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek” (Rom 1:16).

What God needs from us is our trust and faithfulness to Him and His Son; God will cause the seed to grow and prosper.

The Hardened Path

Why couldn't this man understand? What was it that can make one so hard that God's Word has no hope at all of finding a home in him?

Consider the path alongside the farmer's field: how did it get there? It was ground not really much different from the plowed field; it was just that at some time someone no longer valued it and allowed it to become a path for human traffic. In the course of time, the constant flow of human travelers over its surface eventually compacted it so hard that nothing could any longer penetrate the soil.

Is there a counterpart in real life? Most certainly. Consider the experience of the Apostle Paul:

Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the market-place daily with those who happened to be there.

Then certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers encountered him. And some said, "What does this babbler want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods," because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection.

And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean." For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing. (Acts 17:16-21)

Here was human traffic indeed. Athens was a major center of learning, a place where there was the continual traffic of human ideas and philosophies, each to be heard and each to be explored with the intellect, but never with the heart.

For these men, ideas were just intellectual playthings; their lives were spent in endless discussions over the merits of this idea or that, but never with a view to letting those ideas affect their hearts and their lives. The gospel doesn't stand a chance in this kind of environment because the gospel was designed to **change** the way we think and live. When everything is viewed as something to be argued, debated, or fought over, then nothing can affect our innermost thinking, and therefore, our living. No wonder the enemies of God's Truth could so easily destroy it!

Athens was a seat of purely intellectual debates. Paul warns Timothy about this same destructive attitude arising among the brethren in Ephesus:

Charge some that they teach no other doctrine, nor give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which cause disputes rather than godly edification which is in faith. (1 Tim 1:3-4)

If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words... and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth... (1 Tim 6:3-5)

Could we be guilty of this? Is it possible to so intellectualize our religion that it becomes only a thing to be debated and argued: the real meaning of this passage or that, the correctness of this doctrine or that? Whether we believe it is justified or not, our community has certainly been known for this kind of behavior. Some have even wondered, where in all this sterile intellectualizing is the **life** of our religion in Christ? We must ask ourselves if this arguing and debating has hardened **our** hearts to the life-changing essence of the gospel?

The prophet Hosea, thankfully, provides a cure: “Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap in mercy; break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the LORD, till He comes and rains righteousness on you” (Hos 10: 12).

The Rocky Ground

A seed needs three things in order to germinate and produce a healthy plant: soil, water, and sun. Water, to a certain degree, and sun are outside our control: God provides these. But the soil we provide.

Jesus explicitly illustrates the importance of the amount or depth of soil needed for successful growth in the picture he paints through this parable. In the first picture, the seed never moves from the surface. In the second, the seed is able to find some soil, but it is insufficient for long-term growth. Only in the third and fourth picture is the depth of soil sufficient.

Through this picture, Jesus is providing a powerful insight into the nature of our minds. At what we might call the “surface” level of our minds, we are willing to entertain all manner of ideas and thoughts, but only as if they are concepts to be played with. We add or subtract, manipulate the thoughts in a thousand ways, but because we attach no significance to them, because they hold no real value for us, we have no deeper response to them.

Only in the innermost depths of our minds do we find the things that really matter to us. Only here will we find the things we deeply care about and value, the sentiments or ideas to which we cling tenaciously. It might be something our mother or father said to us which we have deeply treasured and used to guide our

AT THE FEET OF JESUS

life, or a belief to which we are deeply committed. This is the place the Bible calls “the heart” because it is the source of the powerful, driving forces that make us who we really are, that move us to do what we do. “Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life” (Prov 4:23).

At the core of these powerful forces is the high value we attach to them. That is why thoughts at the surface of our minds, no matter how well learned or eloquently expressed, can stand in such complete contrast to who we really are deep inside. This is why a Pharisee could also be a hypocrite, playactor, one who had mastered his lines so well.

Why then did the Word of God not prosper in this second person? The gospel wasn’t treated as some kind of intellectual curiosity; indeed, watered by the Father, the power of the gospel began to create an enthusiastic, new life. Yet something was amiss.

The gospel is meant to become the driving force of our lives, the dominant influence and power in our hearts:

My son, do not forget my law, but let your heart keep my commands;
For length of days and long life and peace they will add to you.

Let not mercy and truth forsake you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart, and so find favor and high esteem in the sight of God and man.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths. (Prov 3:1-6)

Sometimes we are not really prepared to believe this, to give the Word of God that dominant place in our hearts, especially if we must give up something we deeply cherish or value. Sometimes the demand just seems too hard.

Have you ever caught yourself saying, “I just don’t think that is what Jesus meant”? What we are really saying is that some things we believe or hold dear are not open for negotiation; there are things we are **not** prepared to give up. These are obstacles to the gospel, things that make it difficult for God’s Life to penetrate fully and deeply into our thinking.

Now a certain ruler asked Him, saying, “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

So Jesus said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery,’ ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not bear false witness,’ ‘Honor your father and your mother.’”

And he said, “All these things I have kept from my youth.”

So when Jesus heard these things, he said to him, “You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”

But when he heard this, he became very sorrowful, for he was very rich. And when Jesus saw that he became very sorrowful, he said, “How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!” (Luke 18:18-24)

Only “one thing” stood in the way of life eternal for this man, but that “one thing” represented everything. He just couldn’t give it up.

And when the sun arises, alas, that lack of depth in the soil of our minds soon deprives the developing new life of moisture and protection. The once exuberant and joyful faith withers up and dies away.

When The Sun Arises

Jesus gives this detail—the rising of the sun—a most unexpected interpretation. Every plant that is going to survive and be productive depends on the water and the beneficial, life-giving power of the sun. Surprisingly, Jesus reveals that the power that is so absolutely essential to our health and growth is “tribulation and persecution” (Matt 13:21). Only in this environment can new life in Christ thrive, if the gospel can reach deep enough within us.

Enter by the narrow gate; for wide [is] the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because **narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life**, and there are few who find it. (Matt 7:13-14)

[Paul and Barnabas] strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, “**We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.**” (Acts 14:22)

If we are determined to hold onto our cherished ideas or goals, then we will deny the Life of God the power to penetrate deeply into our thinking to guide every facet of our lives. For us, that which was meant to bring new life to full maturity within us, will become the cause of stumbling and death. He that has ears to hear, let him hear.

The Thorny Soil

Happily, the third man wasn’t afraid to allow the gospel full access to his heart, but two little words in Jesus’ explanation give us an insight into what went wrong: “Now the ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity” (Luke 8:14).

AT THE FEET OF JESUS

“Go out” means to continue on one’s journey (e.g., Matt 2:8-9; Luke 13:33). This man heard the gospel gladly, understood and received it into a fertile heart, but then went on his way, pursuing the normal course of his life with nary another thought given to the gospel. No wonder the worries and anxieties of this age, the false glamour of riches, and desires for the pleasures of this life also found a ready home in his heart. In time, these “cares” flourished with such abundance that the Word of God could never produce fruit, the one thing that justified its whole existence.

Truly, we must “keep our heart with all diligence, for out of it springs the issues of life!” (Prov 4:23).

The Good Soil

Putting together all three Gospel accounts gives us the following picture of the one God would have us emulate. This man or woman hears the Word, puts together what it is all about (i.e., understands it), approves of the message and receives it willingly, and then holds it fast.

The righteous man or woman cares for that seed, ensuring their heart is not choked by thorns. They work to clear out all the obstacles so the planted seed can thrive. And they persevere in their care until the fruit develops and matures.

Clearly, the faith that truly believes and trusts God’s work to bring forth fruit, doesn’t just sit back as if there is nothing to do. By their diligence and persistence they work together with God till that fruit appears.

The True Man

This last man helps us to remember the Lord Jesus. Preeminently, he is set before us as the finest soil of all. His faithfulness and devotion to his Father and His Word bore in Jesus the True Life of the Father, so much so that he is now called “The Life.” And it is **Jesus’** Life that God seeks to reproduce in us through the gospel.

But even better, through this man, we can find the encouragement and strength to break up our fallow ground, to put away the obstacles in our thinking and root out the pestilent thorns of our desires, that we might bear fruit to the joy and service of our Heavenly Father.

CHAPTER SIX

Parables of The Household

Introduction

There are a number of parables that Jesus gave near the end and at the end of his ministry that stress the urgent need for his disciples to be **watching** and to be **ready** (prepared) for his return. All these parables combine this dual theme, sometimes emphasizing our watchfulness, sometimes emphasizing our readiness or preparation. We will consider the development of these themes in three of Jesus' parables.

The Coming of The True Master of The House

As Jesus sat on the Mount of Olives with his disciples, they asked him, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" (Matt 24:3). Jesus' reply was lengthy, but both Matthew and Luke record this comment:

Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming.
But know this, 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. (Matt 24: 42-43)

But know this, 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. (Luke 12:39)

"Watching" is the clear emphasis of this parable. If the householder had watched, he would not have suffered loss. This seems a simple enough parable, but before we explore it, let's consider exactly what it means to "watch," and what is implied about a disciple's attitude of mind if he **does** or **does not** "watch."

The context of this parable can, once again, lead us to an understanding:

But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only... For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took

AT THE FEET OF JESUS

them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. (Matt 24:36; 38-39)

The implication of these verses is staggering: life just went on as usual to the **very day** Noah entered the ark. There were no outstanding events in the days of Noah that heralded the coming of the flood: no ominous rain clouds to darken the sky or celestial portents to awaken the inhabitants to impending danger. Until the day Noah entered the ark the only witnesses to the coming flood were:

- **Noah's word** heard in his insistent preaching of repentance that men might enter the ark and so escape God's wrath that was coming.
- **Noah's life** that demonstrated his determined faith towards God in actually building the ark of God's promised deliverance.

Those around him may not have seen any signs, but Noah did. While others simply laughed and turned away, Noah saw the world sinking into heart-rending godlessness—a corrupting of God's Way on the earth. Men in those days probably called this “progress” and the development of “human rights.” Noah, nevertheless, saw this growing corruption even among God's own.

Noah watched this ungodliness with its emphasis on personal rights harden into violence of brother against brother, neighbor against neighbor, nation against nation; and violence began to fill the earth: “The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. So God looked upon the earth, and indeed it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth” (Gen 6:11-12).

Definitely, there were signs, but sadly, they were seen only by those not immersed in the “social and political progress” of those days and the pursuit of personal pleasure.

Essential to watchfulness is the humility and faith to see the world and one's own life from God's perspective. Such a perspective awakens us to our desperate need for salvation; it moves us to do something about this need. Watchfulness, as we shall see shortly, is essential to the maintaining of this perspective.

Watchfulness in the New Testament translates two words: one bears the idea of “keeping awake” and the other “keeping alert” (literally, chasing sleep away).

Jesus' Sudden Coming

With all these ideas in mind, now consider the implication of Jesus' words in Matthew 24:42: “Watch therefore, for you do not know what day your Lord is coming.” Everything from the world's point of view is going to roll on “peacefully” until unexpectedly, Jesus returns, and with him, sudden destruction.

If we want, like Noah, to escape all these things and to stand before the Son of Man, this means two things:

First, we must **stay awake**, lest we be lulled by the world's way of thinking. The world makes the evil seem "good" and the good appear "evil." Consequently, we can find ourselves forgetting that our Lord **is** coming, and with him, a day when God's wrath "will be revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men" (Rom 1:18).

But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be... Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming. (Matt 24:37-39, 42)

Second, we must **remain alert**. We must be vigilant to maintain a godly life, lest we also become weighed down by the cares of this world or inebriated by the excitements of this present age—both of which deaden the senses to what is right and wrong. Jesus warned the believers:

But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man. (Luke 21:34-36)

Finally, consider Paul's apparent commentary on this portion of Jesus' discourse:

But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, "Peace and safety!" then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. (1 Thess 5:1-7)

Parable Details

This parable has an odd characteristic: it is entirely in the past tense! Jesus is not referring to something that might occur in the future, but to something that has already occurred in the past.

AT THE FEET OF JESUS

Look again at this parable and marvel at the force of Jesus' exhortation drawn from actual events:

Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming.
But know this, 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. (Matt 24:42-43)

In referring to "the master of the house," Jesus seems to be referencing the rulers and elders of Israel who oversaw the temple, God's House. But only Jesus could truly lay rightful claim to this title as the Messiah. "It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they call those of his household!" (Matt 10:25).

Who, then, were these men who presumed to rule God's house in Messiah's stead? Something was not right in Israel.

Jesus says that if these rulers had known, they wouldn't have allowed the house to be broken into, but sadly they didn't know. And sadly, because they didn't know, they were going to lose everything:

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

Jesus mentioned the watches that were kept at night. There were three of these, one at sunset to 10 p.m.; one at 10 p.m. to 2 a.m.; and one at 2 a.m. to sunrise. Why mention this? Because the true Master of the House of God (Jesus) was going to come in a time of spiritual darkness among his disciples (cf. Isa 9:1-2).

Here is the most surprising detail. The thief that was coming was the true master of the House of God; that is, Jesus (see Matt 10:25 above). Everything had been swept and prepared in God's House by John so that the Passover Lamb, the Messiah, could be received (Matt 12:43-45). But Israel shamelessly rejected their Messiah by casting him out of God's House rather than receiving him in. So Jesus had to come as a thief into the House they claimed for themselves.

The parable states that they would have watched had they anticipated a thief coming. From this we can surmise that these men were absolutely confident their house was well protected and secure. After all, wasn't this **God's** House?

But this was Messiah's House. Sadly, the only way Jesus could get into his Father's house was by becoming a thief and digging a hole through the wall.

Jesus came as a thief through the Roman destruction of the Temple in AD 70. where they **did** dig through the wall to get inside.

Israel lost both their treasures, the Law and the Prophets, and their captives, the faithful in Israel—all were taken away to God's new House:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! **Your house is left to you desolate...** (Matt 23:37-38)

Peter asked, "Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for all?" (Luke 12:41) Jesus' implicit answer is, if it can happen at my first coming, beware lest it also happen at my second coming! If some shepherds of God's flock begin again to assume they are "lords over God's heritage" (1 Pet 5:3), ruling in Messiah's stead, rather than being "examples to the flock," then will not Jesus spoil that house too, leaving behind the faithless and taking the faithful into the Father's new house, the Kingdom?

Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you. You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. (Rev 3:3-5)

Yes, Jesus will indeed come at an hour **we** do not expect, but for those who watch in faithfulness, chasing away sleep and staying ever vigilant and alert, there awaits a blessing greater than we can adequately comprehend:

Let your waist be girded and your lamps burning; 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. (Luke 12:35-37)

Servants in God's House

Jesus now turns his attention to the other aspect of his exhortation to his disciples: "Therefore **you** also be ready..." (Matt 24:44). The parable about the servants in God's House now follows to demonstrate what Jesus had in mind.

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. (Luke 12:42-46)

Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods. But if that evil servant says in his heart, "My master is delaying his coming," and begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matt 24:45-51)

This parable has formed the core of many exhortations, so the essential details are no doubt well understood. What I propose to do is to look at some surprising details found when one begins to compare the parable in Matthew with the one in Luke and also with the parable of the Ten Virgins.

In Luke 12:35 Jesus says his disciples need to have their "loins girded," that is, they need to be ready. Ready though, to do what? "Loins girded" can depict one ready to leave as it was for Israel when she was ready to leave Egypt: "And thus you shall eat it: with a belt on your waist, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. So you shall eat it in haste. It is the LORD's Passover" (Exod 12:11).

While this is a fitting visual image of a watching servant, the Apostle John provides us with another image: "[Jesus] rose from supper and laid aside his garments, took a towel and girded himself" (John 13:4).

Here we see Jesus with his "loins girded" not for a journey, but for service. This is the type of readiness Jesus is indicating in his parable. These servants minister to the needs of those in the household. These are the servants in God's house

over which Jesus, as Son, has been made lord. As such, they have been entrusted into Jesus' special care:

Moses indeed was faithful in all his house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which would be spoken afterward, but Christ as a Son over his own house, whose house we are if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end. (Heb 3:5-6)

I have manifested Your name to the men whom You have given me out of the world. They were Yours, You gave them to me, and they have kept Your word. Now they have known that all things which You have given me are from You.

And all mine are Yours, and Yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given me, that they may be one as we are. While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your name. Those whom You gave me I have kept; and none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. (John 17:6-7, 10-12)

Notice that in both parables the master has to leave. When he does this he appoints his servants to the work of the house. This is exactly what Jesus did when he ascended into heaven; he set his servants over the Father's household, each with his own work.

It is like a man going to a far country, who left his house and gave authority to his servants, and to each his work, and commanded the doorkeeper to watch. Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming—in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning. (Mark 13:34-35)

In Matthew's parable Jesus uses a word for the servants that means slave or bond-servant. This refers to **all** brethren in Christ. They are slaves like their Master. In Luke's parable, on the other hand, Jesus uses a term that refers to the overseer of a household or estate. This is a reference to the shepherds and elders of an ecclesia (e.g., same word translated "bishop" in Titus 1:7).

So in Matthew the two roles are servant and fellow servants. In Luke the two roles are steward or overseer who oversees the men-servants or maid-servants. These distinct roles are important in understanding the drama played out in each of these parables.

In both Matthew's and Luke's record of the parable, one of the responsibilities of the servant is to give food to the household at the appropriate time. In Matthew this refers to nourishment or sustenance provided in the house. In Luke it refers to a measured allowance of grain, that is, rations. In both cases the "food" refers

to those things that are needful to sustain and nourish the household of God—the teaching, instruction, counsel of God’s Word that nourishes the heart and soul of every believer, strengthening their faith and sustaining their lives of service.

The words for “food” also reflect the differing responsibilities in the different roles. It is the domain of all brethren as servants to either help prepare the spiritual food whether for the children or for the grown, or to help serve it.

On the other hand, it is the responsibility of the ecclesial stewards like shepherds to ensure that this food is apportioned among all the servants properly, that all might be well-provided for and none suffer through lack or want. But note, stewards are not to act as little lords or masters over their brethren:

The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. (1 Pet 5:1-3)

Jesus declares that “blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes” (Luke 12:43). This is what it means, at least in part, to be faithful and wise; it is being like the Father Himself: “The eyes of all look expectantly to You, and You give them their food in due season. You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing” (Psa 145:15-16).

No wonder the faithful and wise servants are counted “blessed.” But there is something more remarkable we have yet to see that makes the faith and wisdom of these servants stand out boldly.

In both parables the reward for faithful service is the same: Jesus will set both of them over all his possessions. Our Lord neither recognizes the greatness of our service or the level of our responsibility. It is the faithfulness to **do** what the Master has bidden that brings the blessing of God. And what is his reward? It is even greater responsibility and fuller service.

The term “wicked servant” is Jesus’ term for those who make a good show of discipleship and service, but never really do their Master’s will. As Jesus says in another place: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Matt 7:21-23; cf. also Matt 18:32; 25:26-30).

Now we come to the critical part in each of these parables: the behavior of these servants of Christ towards each other when the Master is no longer there.

In both parables some of these servants of Christ begin to strike or “beat” the other servants. Whether the servant is an ordinary brother or an arranging brother

their behavior begins to manifest their real attitude towards their brethren: that of ruler and judge, that of the Lord of the House.

Do you notice that brethren never argue over positions they see as positions of hard work and service? What brethren argue over are positions they see as positions of power and authority: “It shall not be so among you!” said Jesus in rebuke to his quarrelling disciples, “whoever desires to become **great** among you, let him be your **servant**. And whoever desires to be **first** among you, let him be your **slave**” (Matt 20:26-27). It is when brethren forget this, or perhaps never really acknowledge this, that they begin to “lord it over” and smite their own brethren by abusive applications of the principles of fellowship.

The parable in Luke pictures drunkenness among the shepherds, the very epitome of those who are not ready or prepared. These brethren are more interested in being served, than serving. These brothers so indulge themselves that they quickly become ensnared by the mind-deadening pleasures of this life and the philosophies that proclaim liberty, but instead blur the mind to Divine realities. Remember, these men are shepherds of the ecclesia and set the example for the flock. When these servants then begin to beat their fellow servants in the Matthew parable, guess who they join with in eating and drinking: “[He] begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the **drunkards**” (Matt 24:49).

But the Master will come, and it will be at a time when these abusive servants do not expect... just as it was in the days of Noah.

Jesus says, the Master of the House will “punish” these servants. The word literally means to “cut into two pieces.” It is the picture of the Divine act of judgment that cuts asunder the soul and the spirit, and lays bare before all the thoughts and the intents of this man’s heart: “Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one’s praise will come from God” (1 Cor 4:5).

Here are the judgments: the servant in Matthew is appointed his portion with the hypocrites which surely describes this servant. In Luke the steward is sent away with the unbelievers. In both cases these rewards are appropriate for the double-minded servant and for the faithless elder.

My Lord Delays...

But this leaves one question as yet unanswered: What triggered the remarkable abandon of these apparently faithful brethren? The answer introduces us to a startling discovery and perhaps one of our Lord’s most ignored warnings about these last days. Both Matthew and Luke speak of the Lord **delaying** his coming:

“My Master is delaying his coming” (Matt 24:48; Luke 12:45). The parable of the Ten Virgins has the same message: “the bridegroom tarried” (Matt 25:5 KJV).

In each parable the response to this delay is different, but all three parables make clear a delay is to occur. Perhaps a little more startling is the verb in each case indicating that this delay is not due to some unforeseen circumstances, but rather in each case the Master is **deliberately** delaying his coming.

Have you ever said, “**If** the Lord delays...”? We must banish this forever from our vocabulary because there is no more question or doubt: our Lord **will** delay his coming.

The implication of these words is even more staggering. We are constantly excited by events we see in the Middle East and, especially, in Israel. We feel as if every sign heralds the nearness of our Lord’s return. What, then, will lead us to the absolutely certain conviction, a conviction we all will share, that our Lord is **not** coming when we expected?

Will it be a sudden resolution of world crises, especially in Israel? A resolution that leads to a relative time of “peace” and general economic and political “stability”?

But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, “Peace and safety!” then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. (1 Thess 5:1-3)

Why does Jesus purposely delay his coming? Because only by a delay and the inevitable discouragement and trial it brings can the Master sort out the true disciples from the play actors.

Consider the ten virgins: without that delay there would have been no difference between the wise and the foolish. The unexpected delay sorted out those who really loved their Master and longed to have him there. It separated those prepared for the possible long years of service from those who served only for the gain they expected to receive at the Master’s hand.

We find a similar situation with the servants in the house. The Lord’s delay brought to the light a stark difference in the attitude of the various servants: the faithful and wise servant, just as weary as everyone else, with a deep sigh of disappointment, girded his loins more securely, and began again to serve the Lord’s brethren.

But the other servant, frustrated by this unexpected turn of events, resentful of the years of hard work and self-denial, decided that he had the right to a little well-deserved relaxation and self-indulgence. So loosing his belt, he sits down to eat and drink with others who share his feelings, and to lord it over his brethren.

But barely does this man begin to raise his hand to abuse his brother when a sudden clamor in the house cuts it all short. The Lord of the house had returned! There he sits, clothed in a disheveled garment, soiled with the pleasures of his self-indulgence, caught at the very moment when he “looked not” for his Master.

The images of these parables are sobering. But for the true servant, these parables are meant to sustain faithfulness in the midst of discouragement. “I tell you this now,” said Jesus to his disciples prior to the first day of disappointment, “before it takes place, that when it does take place, you may believe that I am he” (John 13:19).

What sustained once, will surely sustain again.

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