



PARABLES OF
JESUS

THE KINGDOM PARABLES
MATTHEW 13

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How to use this guide

Review the context and big picture every week – The goal of a book study is not just to learn each individual lesson, but to build understanding of the Bible, how it fits together, and how to study it.

Try not to use this guide as a script. The purpose of this material isn't to give you exactly what to say. Rather it is to give you the content you need to structure and develop your own lessons. Teach as much as you feel is important for your class. Feel free to go off topic if your own study leads you to approach the passage in a slightly different direction.

Don't feel like you have to cover everything. There is a lot of material in each lesson. Some classes like to cover a lot of ground. Other classes like to camp on one point and drill deep. Start by teaching the Main Point, then teach the Main Bullet Points. Use the extra detail and discussion questions as you see fit. The goal is to generate discussion, specifically regarding life-application. So don't worry if you don't get all the way through a lesson.

Hide and Seek: The Reason for Parables

Matthew 13:10-17, 34-35

by Steve Jones

“Why can’t you just teach like Jesus?” This is a common suggestion that every Pastor or Bible Teacher has received at some point in their ministry, usually after a poorly written, overly long, or hard to understand sermon. Though it is true that many Bible teachers fail frequently to connect deep theological and biblical truth to everyday life and subsequently leave their listeners wondering what they are supposed to do with what they just heard, there is an equally troubling assumption about the nature of Jesus’s teaching.

The most famous teaching method employed by Jesus was the parable. Because the parables include stories of mustard seeds, and fishermen, and soil, and hidden treasure, we think that they are simple stories intended to make the truths of Jesus more accessible to his listeners, kind of like the Children’s Sermon that many churches used to have. But the truth is that Jesus used parables for a different, almost completely opposite reason altogether.

We will be looking closely at the parables in this study, specifically the Parables in the Gospel of Matthew. As we do so, the best place to start is to ask ourselves what a parable is and why Jesus used them as a primary teaching method. The good news, when it comes to “why”, is that He told His disciples exactly why He taught using them, and it’s not what you think.

But first, what is a parable? The word parable comes from the Greek word “parabole” which can be broken up into para+bole. The “para” prefix is found in other English words like paramedic and paralegal. These are people who work alongside professionals in the field. The “bole” root is found in words like hyperbole, which means to throw too far. The word parable means “to throw (bole) alongside (para)” and refers to a picture or story given as an analogy, comparison, or juxtaposition. In the Jewish world of Jesus’s day, these parables were the same thing as biblical proverbs: riddles, wise sayings, or stories that served as a way of teaching a point.

We start our study in Matthew 13, where Jesus gives his reasons for teaching in Parables. Jesus has just told a parable to a group, and instead of making everything clear, no one understands. The disciples come to Jesus privately and ask for some help in understanding the parable. It’s one of the few instances where we have both the parable and its interpretation. We will look at the parable itself in a later study. The focus of this study is on what Jesus says about why He uses parables.

The Purpose of Parables: To Move Us To Search v10-12

Jesus has just told the famous parable of the four soils. After he finishes, the disciples come to Him and ask what it means. First, it should be noted that far from being simple, homely, accessible teaching, the parables are hard to understand. So much so that not even the disciples get it.

Jesus responds to their request with a cryptic saying that suggests He teaches in parables, not so that He will be easy to understand, but so that His meaning will be harder to grasp. People have a hard time figuring out what to do with this passage. Why is Jesus playing favorites? What makes the disciples so special that they get to know “the real meaning” of the parable? Why is Jesus making it harder for people to understand?

The key to understanding this statement is the first two words of Jesus’s response: “To you.” Jesus says that they have been granted access; they have been given the opportunity to understand the mysteries of the kingdom of God. The question is, “Who does Jesus mean when he says “you?” Does he mean the disciples,

his inner circle of favorite people? The clue is found in the version of this story in the Gospel of Mark. Mark 4:10 says, “His followers, along with the twelve, began asking Him about the parables.” They come to Him for an answer and Jesus gives it to them. Jesus is showing us that the ones who **GET** to understand what He is talking about are the ones who **WANT** to understand what He is talking about. His disciples didn’t understand him either, but they want to understand so they seek answers.

Jesus is saying that He hides his meaning so that we will be moved to seek understanding and, in the process, begin seeking Him. As He said in the Sermon on the Mount, “Seek and you will find.” Anybody can do it. You just have to ask. But not everybody does do it. Many want to use Jesus to get what they want. And when He offers them something different or doesn’t do what they want, they go away.

Teaching in parables is another example of the fact that God wants to reveal Himself to you, but won’t override your free will. He rewards seeking. He leaves enough of Himself in the world to move us to seek Him and to reward those who do. He hides himself enough to allow sinful, selfish, stubborn people to go on with their life uninterrupted. There are only two kinds of people in the world: those who seek God and those who seek to avoid God. Both will be successful in the end.

Why does Jesus teach in parables? Not Him putting the cookies on the bottom shelf or hanging the fruit on the lowest branch. To hide his meaning. Not to be mean, but to get us to seek. It’s an act of love, he isn’t going to override our will. The powerful presence of God is so overwhelming that it would have compulsive force and we would have no choice. Like a parent, in a room. The clearest indicator of the heart of a child is what he does when no one is watching. Why does God hide? So that we will go look for Him.

He isn’t saying, “I am hiding it so that its hard and you have to be smart to get it. The disciples don’t get it. I’m hiding it so that you have to be looking for it.” You have to want it. You have to ask for it. And He promises that those who ask receive and those who seek find. Knock and it will be opened to you.

He isn’t creating unreasonable standards, He is trying to illicit out of us seeking.

The Problem Parables Address v13-15a – “the heart of this people has become dull...”

The prophecy Jesus quotes reveals the problem. The more we hide from God, the more sin dulls our senses to the wonders and presence of God. We hide from God for two main reasons: we want to be God, and we are afraid of God. Both of these conditions go all the way back to the beginning.

We Want to Be God – In Genesis 3:4-5, The serpent tempts Eve with the following promises: The serpent said to the woman, “You surely will not die! ⁵For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

The serpent promises that there won’t be consequences (you...will not die) and that they will gain new wisdom (your eyes will be opened... knowing good and evil). But the main thing that the serpent promises is that they can be God instead of God (you will be like God). That is the essence of sin, the quest to be God instead of God.

That is why Christians throughout time have always considered pride as the deadliest of all sins. In our pride, we try to elevate ourselves to the level of God. We think we know better than He does what we need to survive. We put up defenses and create buffers between us and a world that seems hostile and a God who would intrude. We attempt to control our space. We try to build our own little kingdoms where we can be God. A kingdom is the range of a person’s effective will. The area of the world where what they say goes. The world is harsh, the world is difficult; the world is bitter and frustrating; and the world can hurt you. So, most of us try to develop a sphere where we are in control, where no one else can get to us, and where we feel safe. The problem is that when we do this, we become lords of our kingdom and we only let people in who will do what we say. So, we have to find ways of surrendering because Jesus came to be our Lord.

We Are Afraid of God –In Genesis 3:8-10, after Adam and Eve transgress God’s command, they feel exposed and hide themselves from God. “⁸They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. ⁹Then the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?” ¹⁰He said, “I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself.”

Notice, God had already given them some space. He was not always manifestly present to Adam and Eve. God gives us room, so that we can have freedom. How we use that freedom is up to us. The problem is that our sin makes the presence of God uncomfortable for us. Hebrews 12:29 says, “our God is a consuming fire.” God’s holiness is the source of that fire and consumes sin. So, we hide. We retreat further and further in our own little world, because we are ashamed of our sin, and because we believe our sin. We think we can be like God. We think we know better than He does what constitutes a good life.

The truth is God hasn’t gone anywhere. Psalm 139 articulates this point beautifully. The Psalmist suddenly becomes aware that there is no place he could go where God is not. Psalm 137:7-8 say, “Where can I go from your Spirit? Or Where can I flee from your presence?” The whole Psalm is full of the psalmist realizing how close God is and how deeply God considers every aspect of our lives.

It is our benumbed hearts that are no longer able to perceive His presence in our lives. Like a callous that forms on our skin when it gets rubbed in an uncomfortable way, our souls become callous to the uncomfortable conviction that comes from the awareness of God’s presence and holiness.

The parables are a way of getting us to seek something beyond ourselves, to entice us with the fact that maybe we do not have all the answers and to get us to wonder about things. They are stones in our shoes. Things you walk on for a little while and think “oh ouch this kind of hurts” until you realize that it’s there and you need to deal with it.

The Promise of Parables v15b – “understand...return...heal...”

The problem that parables confront is our own hardness of heart. But if you look closely at the end of the prophesy from Isaiah, you see the result that Jesus is trying to produce in us by telling parables. Verse 15 ends with the statement that if people didn’t have such dull hearts “they would see with their eyes, hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and return, and I would heal them.” If the parables can awaken in us seeking, Jesus is showing us the promise of what will result: understanding. Seeking produces understanding. Understanding leads to returning to God. Returning to God results in healing.

Like the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15, after years spent wasting his money and life, the son experiences great calamity and suffering. When he is just about as far from home and as low as he can get, Luke 15:17 says that “he came to his senses.” He finally becomes aware of what he had previously been numb to. The result of this understanding is to make him want to go home. In Luke 15:18, he says, “I will get up and go to my father.” He is so humbled and ashamed by his sin that he is willing to be his father’s slave. When he gets home, he discovers that his father was waiting for him to come home, wants him back, and is ready to restore him. When the older brother isn’t happy about there not being enough “consequence” for his younger sibling’s bad behavior, in Luke 15:32, the father responds, “this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.”

That is where you and I are. We are lost and overwhelmed by our sin. God desires that we come to our senses, return to Him, and discover that we never ceased to be his children and that He longs to make us whole. He wants us to “begin to live again.”

The parables, instead of being an obstacle to that, are the chosen instrument of Jesus to help us come to our senses, to awaken in us a realization that we don’t have all the answers, and to seek something beyond ourselves...but only if you want it.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is a parable? Why did Jesus teach in parables? What is the goal of the parables?
2. Why did Jesus hide his meaning from people? Who gets to know the meaning of the parables?
3. Why do we hide from God?
4. What does it mean to have a dull heart? What are the symptoms of a dull heart? What is the treatment?
5. What is the connection between seeking, understanding, returning, and healing? What does each mean? How does one lead to the other?

Kingdom Competition: The Four Soils

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

by Steve Jones

Jesus came announcing his kingdom. Mark 1:14-15 says, “Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, 15 and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

Following Jesus means learning to live in His Kingdom. That is why Jesus, in Matthew 6:33, invites us to “seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness.” The problem is that people frequently misunderstand what Jesus meant by His Kingdom. The reason He did this was because it wasn’t just the parables that were hard to understand. Everywhere Jesus went, He was frequently misunderstood.

When Jesus was accused before Pilate, In John 18:33, Pilate asks Jesus, “Are You the King of the Jews?” In John 18:36, Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm.” The Greek word for “realm” is “kosmos” and simply means “order” or “arrangement.” Jesus is telling Pilate that He has a kingdom but it does not fit into the commonly held assumptions about what a kingdom or nation should look like. His kingdom does not conform to or fit neatly in the categories and assumptions and priorities that the world has chosen to arrange itself by.

In Matthew 13, Jesus tells a series of parables to help us understand what His kingdom is like. Many of these begin with the phrase “to what shall I compare the kingdom of heaven” or “the kingdom of heaven is like.” Each parable gives us a quick look into one dimension of how the kingdom of God is not exactly what we were expecting, but everything we need.

Jesus starts by telling a parable about what it takes to really receive the good news of His Kingdom. He compares his announcement to a farmer scattering seed. He is getting us to ask the question: What keeps the gospel from being fruitful? He is drawing our attention not to the seed, or the sower, but the soil.

Jesus Tells a Parable – Four Soils v1-9

Jesus has been traveling throughout Galilee. He has been healing people, teaching, proclaiming the Gospel, arguing with Pharisees, and even managed to get chased by his family who thought He was crazy. Now in chapter 13, he starts teaching again. A large crowd assembled around Him and was pressing onto Him so much that He ended up using a boat as a makeshift stage. He was teaching from the boat while people listened from the land. It says that here for the first time in Mark’s Gospel Jesus begins to speak in parables to the people. The parable He tells is about a farmer scattering seed on different kinds of soil.

Jesus Tells the Meaning of the Parable v18-23

In the last study, we looked at the verses 10-17 in which Jesus reveals why He teaches in parables. Now, Jesus explains the meaning of the parable. It might sound off that the interpretation is separated from the parable itself, but the meaning of the parable is intimately connected with what He just said about why He teaches in parables. He is going to show why the same gospel proclamation can have such different effects on people, provoking some to seek and some to stay where they are. Jesus explains that a key determiner of the effect the gospel has in our lives is what kind of hearer we are.

The Four Kinds of Hearers v13-20

- Hard Soil, Unresponsive Hearer, Stolen Word v19: The first soil is hard. The seed cannot penetrate it and the birds quickly come to take it away. This is a person who, out of hardness of heart, doesn’t

respond. Maybe he feels like he doesn't need it, or that it can wait, or that he doesn't understand. Whatever the reason, the opportunity is lost and the soil is left unchanged. If the Word is to be productive, the soil of our hearts needs to be tilled and prepared to hear it.

- Rocky Soil, Superficial Hearer, Scorched Word v20-21: The second hearer is compared to rocky soil. He hears the Word and accepts it. Though initially excited about it, he fails to realize the cost. He follows as long as it is easy or beneficial but once it becomes difficult, he quickly falls away. He recognizes the benefits of grace but not the cost. Hardship in life (affliction) or in relationships (persecution) scorch the Word like the sun scorches seed in shallow soil. If the Word is to be productive, the soil of our hearts needs to be plowed deeply so we can have a mature faith, not simplistic-bumper sticker answers that won't get us through hard times.
- Thorny Soil, Worldly Hearer, Squeezed Word v22: The third hearer hears the Word, accepts it, but doesn't take seriously the demands it makes on his life. He wants the benefit of the gospel but he wants his stuff too. In the end, he is unable to serve two masters so he chooses the one he really follows. The Word is squeezed out of the person's life.
- Cultivated Soil, Fruitful Hearer, Successful Word v23: The fruitful hearer hears, understands, does – and he yields fruit, a product that strengthens the kingdom of God. How does the final soil bear fruit? It doesn't say. The focus isn't on trying to bear fruit. The focus is on trying to be good soil.

Application: How to Be Good Soil

For some reason, the primary way many people interpret this parable is by posing the question, "Which of the Four Soils/Hearers are saved?" Some say just the last one. Others say they all are except the first one. But the question itself misses the point. Seeing the parable this way basically boils down to following Jesus to try to figure out "the basic minimum requirements for missing hell." The question this parable poses is "What kind of soil are you?" We aren't supposed to be looking at others trying to figure out what kind of soil they are and if that's enough to avoid going to hell. Rather, we are supposed to use this parable as a grid to examine our own lives, ask ourselves what kind of soil we are, and figure out how to do what we need to do to become good, fruitful soil. By looking at what each soil needed to bear fruit, we can figure out what work our own souls need to be similarly transformed.

- Soften Your Heart – The first soil was not ready for the seed. It was hard. The same is often the case with our hearts. We can be hard hearted, thinking we know more than God what we need, then becoming mad at God when we don't get it. Or we can stubbornly insist that God do things our way. Or we can think that we don't need God right now. All these are symptoms of a hard heart. The answer to a hard heart is humility: acknowledging you don't know what is best for you, laying down your expectations and trying it God's way. James 1:21 says, "In humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls."
- Deepen Your Understanding – If your understanding of the gospel is that God promises you an easy, care-free, pain-free life, then as long as things are going well, you will be fine. But when life gets hard, you will wonder what is happening. The solution is to deepen your understanding of who God is, and what He promises. In John 16:33, Jesus told his disciples: "These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world." Peace comes not from an easy life, but from the presence of Jesus in the midst of difficulty. The gospel will bear fruit in our lives as we grow our knowledge of God and draw near to Him in worship and obedience.
- Weed Your Life – A garden full of cultivated, rich, deep, soil can still be rendered fruitless by the presence of things growing in it that don't belong. Weeding our lives is important. Look closely in v22 at the things that compete with the word for space in our lives: the worries of the world, the deceitfulness of richness. In Mark's version of this parable, the phrase "and the desire of other

things” is added to this (Mark 4:13). Desire for other things. All of them distract us by promising false fulfillment in other things. If the Word is going to be fruitful in our lives, we have to learn to silence the voices of worry and wealth, and focus our attention on following Jesus with our whole heart.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why is it wrong to look at this parable through the lens of trying to figure out which soils/souls are saved, and which aren't? What's wrong with this approach? What does Jesus want us to see?
2. What are some things that characterize a hard-hearted soul? What does it mean that the Word gets stolen?
3. What are some things that characterize a shallow soul? What does it mean that the Word gets scorched?
4. What are some things that characterize a weed-ridden soul? What does it mean that the Word gets squeezed?
5. How can we cultivate the soil of our lives so that we can avoid these errors and make ourselves good soil, that the seed of the gospel can be sown into and become fruitful?

Kingdom Growth: Mustard Seed

Matthew 13:31-32

by Steve Jones

Whether it's kids, or pets, or bank accounts, we all like to know how big something will get. Initial size, however, is not always an indicator of future proportions. A friend of mine one time had a kid who saved his allowance and chore money in order to buy a pet. Turns out that pet was a pet lizard. When they got to the store, the child realized that he had more money than he thought and could buy a more expensive lizard. So, he "upgraded" to one he had never heard of but was about the same size as the original focus of his reptilian desire. They took the new "pet" home and while the son set up the habitat for his new companion, the parents googled the lizard to find out more information about care, etc. That's when they saw it; a line in the description that astonished them. It turns out that this lizard that currently could fit in the palm of their hand normally grew to about 6 feet long and was accustomed to run on its hind legs while hissing and spitting. Suffice it to say, there was a return trip to the pet store in their future.

This modern "true story" parable reminds us that sometimes you can't predict the full-grown stature of something by looking at its initial size. In Matthew 13:31-32, Jesus told a similar, though less nightmarish, parable about the Kingdom that He came to bring: ³¹He presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; ³²and this is smaller than all other seeds, but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches."

The Kingdom Grows Beyond Our Expectation

Jesus says that his kingdom might look small initially but it will grow into a big thing, something you were not expecting it to turn into. He uses the image of a mustard seed. People have misspent a fairly large amount of time trying to see if Jesus was being accurate in claiming the mustard seed as the smallest seed. Whether a smaller seed can be found, it doesn't defeat the point that the mustard seed is really, really small. In common wisdom and among the rabbis and teachers of Jesus's day, the mustard seed was considered the smallest seed. It was a common theme to compare something to a mustard seed. Jesus in fact does it couple times.

The point is that the mustard plant does begin as one of the smallest of all the seeds. And though it is just an herb, it eventually grows to be the size of a small tree. In Judaea, mustard plants were documented to grow upwards of 8, 10, or even 12 feet tall. The kingdom begins inconspicuously but its end will be great. It may currently be comprised of a rag tag bunch of fishermen and a former tax collector instead of the powerful, wealthy, elite, but it will one day grow beyond its humble beginnings.

Sometimes, especially when we pray, we prepare ourselves to be underwhelmed by God. We almost expect God not to answer our prayers, or to do less than we were expecting. But the continual promise of scripture is that God wants to show us his plans are greater not less than ours. In Ephesians 3:20, Paul describes God as "Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think." God is able to do not just more, but exceedingly more than we ask or even think is possible. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 2:9, "Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and *which* have not entered the heart of man all that God has prepared for those who love Him."

We should not be shocked when God transforms something small and insignificant into something useful in his hands. God has been doing this since the beginning with man. In Psalm 8:3-6, the psalmist realizes this. He writes, ³"When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, The moon and the stars, which You have

ordained; ⁴ What is man that You take thought of him, And the son of man that You care for him? ⁵ Yet You have made him a little lower than God, And You crown him with glory and majesty! ⁶ You make him to rule over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet.” Man is nothing compared to God. But God raises us up, crowns us, and entrusts us with the stewardship of what He created. Everything.

The Kingdom Grows by God's Power

He takes things that are small and exalts them so that people will realize the surpassing power is from God not men. In a passage similar to this parable, God, in Ezekiel 17:22-24, talks about taking the smallest sprig of a cedar tree and doing the same thing with it as the mustard seed: ²² Thus says the Lord God, “I will also take a *sprig* from the lofty top of the cedar and set *it* out; I will pluck from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one and I will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. ²³ On the high mountain of Israel I will plant *it*, that it may bring forth boughs and bear fruit and become a stately cedar. And birds of every kind will nest under it; they will nest in the shade of its branches. ²⁴ All the trees of the field will know that I am the Lord; I bring down the high tree, exalt the low tree, dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will perform *it*.”

The ultimate goal of God using the mustard seed and the smallest cedar sprig is for us to realize that God did it, not us. He exalts the lowly and humbles the exalted. He does so not to shame or bully us but to teach us to trust Him and not ourselves. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:27-29: ²⁷ but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, ²⁸ and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no man may boast before God.”

We all like to be on the winning team, so we sometimes look to join the one most likely to win. This principle doesn't work with spiritual things. God frequently takes what may not look like much to the world and uses it to do amazing things. That is why there are frequent reminders in scripture not to trust in appearances. In 1 Samuel 16:7, during the selection of David, God tells Samuel, “God *sees* not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” In Zechariah 4, God tells lowly Zerubbabel that He will rebuild the temple. Then to remind him that this task was assigned not because Zerubbabel was great but because God wanted to show His power through Zerubbabel, He tells him to rely on God and not to be afraid of humble beginning. Zechariah 4:6, 8-10 says, ⁶ “This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel saying, ‘Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’ says the Lord of hosts...”

⁸ Also the word of the Lord came to me, saying, ⁹ “The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house, and his hands will finish it. Then you will know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you. ¹⁰ For who has despised the day of small things?”

God does great things through seemingly insignificant people. So we, like Zechariah, should trust not in our own strength but in God, and we should not despise the day when things seem small because God is in the habit of turning those small things into great things.

The Kingdom Grows to Offer Refuge

There is another detail in this parable that it is important to notice. Parables aren't exactly allegories, not everything represents something else, but in this case the birds of the air coming to nest in its branches is significant because it is a phrase that is repeated from the Ezekiel passage. The birds coming to nest reminds us that the purpose of the tree's growth is to provide a home and shelter. The kingdom Jesus came to bring is meant to be a refuge for people to find hope.

Many leaders today try to use the church as an instrument of their own social advancement or as a means to draw attention to themselves. This is what Jesus says about such people in Matthew 7:22-23: ²² Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ ²³ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you.’”

The purpose of the kingdom isn't to allow us to construct for ourselves mini-empires but rather to allow us to be used as instruments of God's blessing to those who need it. When the kingdom reaches its full potential, like the mustard tree, it draws people to it who are looking for safe places to rest, recover, and call home.

In the parable, Jesus uses the birds as a way to remind the Jews of His day that God's plan never was just about them but always was for them to be a lighthouse and blessing for the whole world. In Genesis 22:18, God promised Abraham, "18 In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice."

The Jews of Jesus's day had intentionally isolated themselves. They thought God chose them, therefore they were more important than other people. Jesus reminds the Jews that the purpose of his kingdom is to draw all people to himself so that they can find the true fulfillment that can only be found there.

Discussion Questions

1. What limits do we sometimes put on God? Have you ever seen God do something beyond your expectations?
2. How do we sometimes rely on our own power not on God's? Have you ever seen God use someone or something unexpected to do great things? Have you ever seen something that could only be accounted for by the power of God?
3. What does it mean to not "despise the day of small things?"
4. Have you seen people try to use the kingdom of God to construct little kingdoms for themselves? Or use the kingdom of God to benefit themselves?
5. What does it mean that the kingdom of God exists to offer refuge? What refuge does the kingdom of God offer? What other places do people go to for refuge?

Kingdom Change: A Little Leaven

Matthew 13:33

by Steve Jones

Athletic trainers often tell people that change doesn't happen overnight. The reason is that once we start down a new path, we want to start seeing results immediately. But when it comes to exercise, it normally takes six weeks before changes become noticeable. Sadly, for people beginning exercise regimens at the start of the new year, six weeks is right around the candy deluge of Valentine's Day and the first appearance of Girl Scout Cookies.

We are sometimes like a person asking the trainer, "What's the point? Why don't I see any change?" We look around at a world still full of evil and wonder what difference Christianity is making.

The Jews of Jesus's day were wondering the same thing. Luke 17:20-21 recounts such an exchange: ²⁰ Now having been questioned by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God was coming, He answered them and said, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; ²¹ nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or, 'There it is!' For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst."

Like exercise and body transformation, we misunderstand how kingdom transformation occurs. The Jews wanted the Messiah to bring in His Kingdom with war and conquest. They wanted to see their enemies overthrown and punished. They wanted to see themselves exalted to places of prominence, power, and wealth. We sometimes want very similar things. We expect thunder and lightning. We expect easy, one-sided victories. We want to see clear, unequivocal proof that God's side is winning. And when we don't see it happening the way we expect, we become frustrated, fearful, or disillusioned.

In order to teach us that His Kingdom doesn't expand the way we think, Jesus tells a parable about some leaven and a lump of dough. Matthew 13:33 says, "He spoke another parable to them, "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of flour until it was all leavened."

The Kingdom Doesn't Seem Like Enough

Sometimes we read biblical measurements and are not sure how much it really is. It is kind of like how some people handle the differences between Celsius and Fahrenheit, or miles and kilometers. How long is a cubit? We don't know, so we aren't sure if something is really big or really small when we see things measured that way. That is the first issue with this parable. Though your bible may use the relatively modern unit of a "peck," or the relatively non-descript, "measure," the Greek says that the woman is working with 3 "saton" of flour. The saton was a unit of measurement used in Judaism. Interestingly, according to early Jewish texts, the exact weight isn't known but is thought to refer to the amount it would take to hold the contents of 144 eggs. Rough estimates put the volume at around 3 gallons, which is why many translations use the word "peck," which is 2 gallons. One saton of flour would probably weigh about 20 pounds. This means that the woman wasn't using a few cups of flour to make a small loaf of bread. She was working, when you add the water weight, about 100 pounds of dough.

Another issue with this parable is yeast. People didn't understand how yeast worked until recently. They just knew that certain bread rose and others didn't. They didn't "leaven" bread by sprinkling yeast into water then mixing it with the dough. They would retain a portion of previously leavened dough and add it to an unleavened flour and water mixture. Add a small handful of old dough to a new batch and given some time, the whole batch will be transformed. They didn't know how it worked, it just did. A little bit of leaven could leaven an entire lump of dough.

Jesus is drawing a stark contrast between the massive amount of dough and the little leaven that she had. Just like the leaven, the kingdom of Jesus doesn't seem like its enough to fix all the problems of this broken world. Jesus continually tells us that it doesn't take much to do great things for God.

Later in Mathew 17:19-20, the disciples ask Jesus why they were unable to cast a demon out of somebody. "19 Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not drive it out?" 20 And He said to them, "Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you."

It doesn't take a lot of faith for God to do a lot through you. It doesn't take a lot of leaven to change a massive lump of dough. It doesn't take much for the kingdom to take root and begin transforming the culture it is planted in.

The Kingdom Doesn't Work The Way You Think

The leaven parable also illustrates that the kingdom of Jesus doesn't work the way we might think. When we think about kingdoms, our minds typically go to armies and conquest. In the "real world," kingdoms take up space and compete for the same ground. One kingdom can't expand unless it intrudes on another. Kingdoms on earth are a zero-sum game.

The disciples and other Jews were still clinging to the idea of a vast and splendid earthly kingdom for Israel once the Messiah came. Even after the resurrection, the disciples were wondering if it was going to happen the way they imagined. In Acts 1:6, records the scene: "So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?"

Everyone in Judaea would think it very strange that the Messiah's reign should begin so quietly and on so small a scale and that it would progress the way Jesus said. They just couldn't wrap their mind around the idea that Jesus came to fulfill the promises that God made to Israel but also to frustrate their expectations of what that would look like. The problem was that they were too near-sighted. They were applying all the promises about the Messiah to their current political problem. Jesus had come as a revolutionary but not to overthrow the Romans. He had come to overthrow death. Jesus had come to be a righteous judge, but more than just to rid the nation from foreign oppression. He came to purify His people from sin. Jesus had come to be a restorer, but He was coming to do more than simply restore Israel to a place of global political prominence. He was beginning the process of restoring all of creation that had been enslaved since Adam's Fall in Eden.

That is why cooking is a better metaphor than conquest for the kingdom Jesus came to bring. Jesus isn't looking to destroy his enemies and crush them under his feet. Yeast doesn't work by changing dough into something else. It works by transforming it into the best version of itself. Same with Jesus. He longs to transform us, not into something different, but into the version of ourselves that He always created us to be. He is looking to convert his enemies and transform them into followers and friends.

Jesus can't use the same weapons and tactics as the enemies because He is waging a civil war. Each rebel is a beloved child that He hopes will lay down their arms and join His side. His kingdom grows not because it defeats its opponents but because it draws them in.

The Kingdom Doesn't Stop Until Its Victorious

The comparison of the Kingdom of God to leaven has one more additional dimension to it. Yeast is like a little engine. Feed it sugar and it produces carbon dioxide, alcohol, and more yeast. Once leaven gets inside a lump of dough, it consumes sugar, produces more yeast, and just keeps working until it runs out of fuel. Given enough time, it doesn't matter how little leaven you use or how much dough you have, eventually the leaven will succeed in changing the whole lump.

The Kingdom of God is like that. Though the initial size might be imperceptible, though it may be hidden in an overwhelming sea of humanity, the kingdom keeps growing. The kingdom's goal is transforming people and bringing them into the light. Every person walking in darkness is not opposition to the kingdom, they are fuel. The kingdom absorbs them and expands to include them, and now one more transformed soul is ready to be a part of transforming others.

In Matthew 16:18, after Peter admitted to believing Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus responds, "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it." The Kingdom of God will not be overcome. Every believer is heaven placed strategically within a culture to begin a sometimes slow, sometimes hard to notice, but inevitable transformation.

Discussion Questions:

1. Have you ever been in a situation where you were expecting for results sooner than was reasonable? How did you respond?
2. How does this parable remind us that God is able to do great things using small instruments? Have you ever seen this happen?
3. How does this parable illustrate that the kingdom of God doesn't work the way we think? What are some bad ideas about how the Jews of Jesus' day thought the kingdom of God should work? What bad ideas do we have?
4. What is the difference between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this earth? How does the kingdom of God expand?
5. How does this parable remind us that the gates of Hell will not prevail against God's kingdom?

Kingdom Cost: Hidden Treasure & Costly Pearl

Matthew 13:44-45

by Steve Jones

When it comes to shopping, there are two distinct species: the grazer and the hunter. Like an antelope in the savannah, the grazer wanders here and there looking for whatever it happens to find. Sometimes they don't even know what they are seeking. When asked, "what are you looking for," the grazer responds "I'll know it when I see it." The hunter is different. The hunter knows what they are looking for and that is all they focus on. Like a lion on the savannah looking for antelope. Once they spot it, they stalk it carefully, pounce quickly, and are gone.

People often live their lives the way they shop. Some people drift through life not sure what they are looking for and occasionally being surprised by things they never would have planned for themselves. Others focus on their goals and make purposeful progress towards them meeting both success and failure along the way. Neither, I think, is necessarily a better approach to life. Both are based, probably, on our temperament and personality.

As we continue our study of the parables, we are going to look today at two parables that Jesus tells that deal with different ways of seeking and finding the kingdom. They also address the cost for following Him. Both are parables about finding something of value that requires sacrifice in order to possess. One parable is focused on an accidental finder who stumbles upon a treasure by chance. The other parable is about a systematic seeker who finds more than he was looking for. Both are required to make a choice. Jesus tells both parables to underscore a point about his kingdom: the invitation is free but to enter in will cost you everything you have.

Parable of the Hidden Treasure: The Kingdom of Heaven Awakens Joy (Matthew 13:44)

The first parable Jesus tells is about the man who stumbles upon a hidden treasure. Matthew 13:44 says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."

The picture is one of a man taking a journey on foot. In preindustrial times, before government-maintained roads, people frequently cut across other people's land to get where they were going. Jesus tells the parable of one such man walking through some land on a journey to who knows where. By chance, he happens to discover a treasure that had been buried in the field. The man isn't trying to steal another person's savings account. He has found a treasure that has been long forgotten and abandoned. Before the advent of the modern banking system, people would divide their money and bury it in various hoards. The picture here is of one such hoard being buried then forgotten. The land changes hands numerous times and no one even knows the treasure is there. According to Jewish law, if you own the field, you own what is in it. The man desires to obtain the treasure legally, so he gathers enough money to buy the field outright. The problem is that the cost of the field is sizeable. It requires him to sell everything else he currently owns in order to buy the field. The man does it eagerly, willingly, because he is overwhelmed with joy over his new discovery.

Jesus says that that his kingdom is like that treasure.

Hidden: The kingdom is not just hidden, it is hidden in an unlikely place. We tend to think God will use the powerful, smart, and wealthy, the ones who have the marks of what our culture considers successful. God doesn't work that way. God uses the things that no one expected to be useful to accomplish His plan. He takes things that have been cast aside and makes them useful instruments in His hands.

We often equate forgotten with worthless. Sometimes, we hopefully say things like one man's trash is another man's treasure. We hear stories of valuable cars found in barns, or valuable paintings found at garage sales, but most of our experience testifies to the fact that most of what people throw out is trash. More often than not one man's trash becomes your trash if you take it. That is why most people don't go looking for hidden treasure in junk heaps or landfills.

But Jesus understood his ministry and His kingdom as something others had cast aside and forgotten about. In Matthew 21:42, ⁴²Jesus said to them, "Did you never read in the Scriptures, 'The stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief corner stone; This came about from the Lord, And it is marvelous in our eyes'?" The scripture He is quoting is Psalm 118:22.

Costly: When talking about turning someone else's trash into treasure, we frequently emphasize what we paid versus what it is now worth. But the kingdom of Jesus isn't like that. It has been cast aside and forgotten because it comes at a great cost. GK Chesterton, an early 20th Century Christian writer said it this way, "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried." The chief difficulty is that Jesus requires us to forsake everything else in order to follow him. In Matthew 16:24-25, Jesus says, ²⁴"If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. ²⁵For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it." This is the paradox of the Christian life: entrance into the kingdom is a free gift, but to accept it requires costly sacrifice.

Joy: This parable doesn't end its description with the cost to be paid to possess the kingdom. There is one additional important dimension: joy. The man doesn't sell everything he has out of obligation, or fear, or guilt, or because it's the smart thing to do, or because it's a good business decision. He does it out of joy. He makes the sacrifice willingly, eagerly because what he gains is more than sufficient compensation for the sacrifice he has made. As Christian Missionary and Martyr Jim Elliot famously said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

Jesus says His kingdom promises us this joy. In finding the kingdom of Jesus, you have found something that will overwhelm you and fill your life and flood your soul with so much joy, peace, contentment, and love that you would trade everything in the world to possess it. This kingdom is the only true source and conduit of transformative joy in life. You can have it, if you give up trying to find it in all those other places.

Parable of the Costly Pearl (Matthew 13:45-46): The Kingdom of Heaven Requires Sacrifice

Jesus tells a similar parable in Matthew 13:45: ⁴⁵"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, ⁴⁶and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it."

This parable is almost identical to the previous one regarding the main point: the kingdom costs. But this time the person doesn't stumble upon the treasure. He is actively looking for it. The man is described as a merchant. He is not a shopkeeper but someone who travels to various markets to find and purchase objects of value then transport them back home for sale. He is actively looking for fine pearls. While searching, he finds one of such exceptional perfection that it makes all the others pale in comparison. This one pearl is just a rare beauty and such a tremendous cost that in order to purchase it he must sell all that he has. It is important to clarify exactly what "all he has" means. In the previous parable about buying land, the man sold everything he possessed to buy the land. In this parable, it seems more likely that what he sold was his previously acquired stock of pearls. He had been traveling around buying up pearls to sell back home. But in order to purchase this one pearl, he has to sell all his other pearls in order to be able to afford it.

The pearls in this story represent the things in life that we seek to give our lives meaning. We are all seeking something. We place our hope in things like wealth, power, success, pleasure, and relationships. We look to these things to give our lives meaning, purpose and fulfillment. None of these things can fill us up completely so we, like the man buying pearls, try to acquire as many of them as possible hoping that together they can make us feel whole. These things aren't necessarily bad. They just weren't ever meant to be the primary source of fulfillment in your life. They make great servants but lousy lords. They can be blessings from God if

seen correctly and put in their proper place. Otherwise, they become idols.

Jesus says His kingdom will fulfill you but you will only ever be able to possess it if you are willing to stop looking for meaning and purpose in those other things. That is the true meaning behind one of Jesus's most controversial statements. In Luke 14:26, He says, "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple." Jesus isn't telling us to actively hate the members of our family. He is saying that our devotion to Him must be so strong and single-minded in focus that all other commitments are weak by comparison.

In Mark 12:30, Jesus says that the greatest commandment is to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." We often focus on the different aspects of ourselves that we are supposed to love God with. We say things like, "how do we love God with our minds, or heart, etc?" But the word "all" should be the real focus. We aren't supposed to just love God with our heart, but with our whole heart. Asking how we love God with our mind is important. Asking how we love God with our whole mind is just as important. That requires us to ask what it means to love God with only a portion of ourselves as well as what else we are loving with that remaining portion.

Conclusion:

What are you seeking? The truth is that the main problem isn't what you are seeking, it's where. We are all looking for purpose, fulfillment, joy. We just keep going to the wrong source. We end up being the people in Jeremiah 2:13 about whom God says, "For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns, Broken cisterns That can hold no water." We are seeking a good thing but looking in the wrong place. We are seeking nourishment, or encouragement, or love, but we don't realize that you are going to empty wells.

The kingdom of God is an invitation to figure out how our desires and all the ways in which God made us can find their true fulfillment in the light of who He is and who He is calling us to be. All of that emptiness we feel right now, all of those things we don't tell anybody else, all those fears and anxieties, all those holes in our heart that we feel, those things you are trying to fill it up with aren't working. Because they can't, they were never meant to. We have a God sized hole... our hearts are restless until they rest in Him.

Discussion Question:

1. What is the difference in the two seekers in the two parables? How do they relate to two ways people live their lives?
2. What does it mean to stumble on the kingdom of God by accident?
3. Why does the man sell everything he has?
4. What does it mean that Jesus says He is "the stone which the builders rejected?"
5. What do the pearls represent? What pearls do we gather for ourselves? What does it mean that Jesus's kingdom is a pearl of great price?

Kingdom Sifting: Handling Hypocrites

Matthew 13: 24-30; 36-43; 47-50

by Claire Mummert

“Hypocrite!”, “I don’t go to church because it’s full of hypocrites”, and other phrases like it are things we have all heard in our life as believers. People look into our churches and see those who proclaim to be Christians around them who are not, in their opinion, living as a Christian ought. Somehow, most people have some idea how they expect a Christian to behave, and, inevitably, people fall short. Maybe it is as small as getting cutoff in traffic by someone with the metal fish bumper sticker or maybe it is as big as being abused by someone in the church; either way, they have felt firsthand the sting that comes with the harsh reality of hypocrisy. They had expectations for someone who they expected to treat them as Jesus would have treated them but were met with a different set of circumstances. While every believer will have days when they make mistakes or bad choices, Jesus has not brought us fully to perfection yet, there will also be those that label themselves as disciples when they are not.

John the Baptist spent time in Matthew 3 warning the people that the coming Messiah would have a “winnowing fork” and that He would “clear His threshing floor and gather His wheat into the barn, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.” Even John knew that there would be a time when Jesus would have to address the issue of false and true followers within His midst. If this is true for a time when Jesus walked the Earth in the flesh, we can be sure that it is true in the present as well. As believers, we can even resonate with those friends who have struggled with this disconnect and feel frustrated by the existence of hypocrites within the church. We may even be among those who regularly cry out to the Father, asking Him to fix it and remove those people who sully His name.

As we look at these two parables in Matthew 13, we will see Jesus teaching through these stories about this exact issue. He looks at the large crowd that has followed Him and He knows that they are not all true followers or disciples. This passage may also be referring to unbelievers but firmly points to the idea of false disciples. He knows that this will be a struggle going forward as well. So, He gives us these parables to show us that He sees and understands but also shows us that the time will come for His winnowing fork to be used.

The Wheat and The Weeds: Kingdom of Heaven – A Work in Progress (Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43)

- **Situation** - Jesus has just finished rebuking the Pharisees and has been teaching the crowds. He spends time with the Pharisees, showing them that the fruit of their life is the true sign of their heart. He is challenging them to examine themselves and find out if they are really following the truth. He shows them that the One they should follow is here, the kingdom is at hand. He uses Jonah to show them that He is the greatest and is worthy of being followed. Further, He shows them that when they do not follow what is right, when they do not fill themselves up with truth, it just leaves room for more evil. Over and over He is encouraging the Pharisees and the people to examine themselves and find out the state of their hearts. He goes so far as to say that those who know Him and are in His family are not related by blood but by obedience to God, the Father. This is not a slight to His family, but a statement about what it means to follow Him and how to access the kingdom. When seen through that lens, it makes sense that the parables that follow speak about those who truly follow Christ and those who do not.
- **Satan’s Strategy** – Without getting too apocalyptic, who is the enemy spoken of in this parable? Jesus is talking figuratively, insinuating that, much like the farmer who found an enemy had been to his field, God’s perfect world was also broken by an enemy, The Enemy, Satan. “An enemy did this” says the farmer in verse 28. This is an easy tie in and almost echo of the moment in The Garden when God confronts Adam and Eve with their sin. In Genesis 3 Eve says, “The serpent deceived

me”. An enemy has surely been here, an enemy did this. In both cases, things were in the shape of their Creator and they were ruined by an enemy.

- **Stop Playing God** – The seed sown in the parable is a weed or tare, a weed that looks similar to wheat, while the seed sown in Genesis was sin. Both of these seeds pollute the initial work of the Creator and will require a great work to be fixed. When the servant asks in Matthew 13:28, “So, do you want us to go and pull them up?”, he is behaving much like the Israelites. Throughout the Old Testament, Israel tried to fix their sin issue themselves. They worked hard, they begged for a king, and even made excess alters to themselves, all trying to fix the issue of their brokenness. They were trying to fix the issue of the world’s brokenness due to sin. They try to pull up the weeds themselves. Then, Israel gets excited for a savior, a Messiah, but was not looking for someone who would suffer, heal, and offer grace. They were not prepared for Jesus. Israel wanted a conquering hero, someone to conquer Rome and remove all those who were not true Jews from the kingdom. If they understood the meaning of this parable at the beginning, they would have also said, “Pull up the weeds, Jesus!” But that is not the method offered by the farmer. He chooses to let the weeds grow alongside the wheat and to be separated on the day of the harvest. Similarly, Jesus is not coming to Israel as a conquering hero...this time. He is going to let those who are true and false coexist. He even allowed Judas to continue as one of His disciples until the end. But, there will be a day when He comes back and He separates the true followers from the false, the believers from the unbelievers. He will be the conquering hero then, ready to reconcile the world. “Look, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him...” says Revelation 1:7. He will come back and all that is wrong with Creation will be set right again.

Later in the chapter, Jesus takes time to explain the parable to the disciples so that they understand these ideas more fully. The fact that Jesus takes this time to explain these truths to the disciples further illustrates that not everyone who follows Him are true followers. The explanation of the parable was not meant for everyone. Jesus already mentioned in chapter 13 verses 11 and following that not everyone would understand the parables because their hearts were too callous (v. 15). However, He takes this time with the disciples because He knows that they truly follow Him. We are meant to be like the disciples – not perfect in the slightest, but ready to learn and listen from Jesus, from The Word. Then when He returns, we will “shine like the sun in [the] Father’s kingdom” (13:43) because we will be the wheat ready for harvest, we will be the true disciples.

The Net: The Kingdom of Heaven Awaits Perfection (Matthew 13:47-50)

Both of these parables start with the phrase, “the kingdom of heaven is like...” As the disciples and the crowd that surrounded Jesus hear these words, they are getting a feel that the kingdom is simultaneously at hand and still in the future. Luke 17 shows Jesus teaching on just this topic as He says, “the kingdom of God is in the midst of you”, meaning Himself. As He teaches the crowds, He is showing them that the kingdom is here in Himself, but He is also reminding them that the kingdom has not yet come. He reminds them that there will be a day when all things will be reconciled and made new again even though that day is not today. This harkens back to Matthew 6:10, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Jesus was in the business of bringing the kingdom to God’s people, making the Earth reflect the true worship that exists in heaven.

In this passage, Jesus illustrates the kingdom of heaven that the crowds currently experience as well as its future fulfillment. Jesus is like the fisherman who dragged the net ashore. The crowds are following Him, some who truly follow Him and obey Him, some who follow Him to seem like they will obey Him, some who are curious, others who are scared, and more. There is truly a sea of people who flock to Jesus. The kingdom is here. The fisherman is fishing and calling for the fish. But the kingdom is also in the future. There is a “now but not yet” feeling that comes over us in these passages. There will be a day when the good fish will be separated from the bad fish. “The angels will go out, separate the evil people from the righteous” (13:49). The kingdom will come, and all things will be made right. Revelation 21:4-5 echoes this: ““He will wipe away

every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.' And he who was seated on the throne said, 'Behold, I am making all things new.'"

Jesus is showing the crowds and the disciples that those who follow Jesus are a mix of those who follow Him in truth and those who do not. He wants them to know that all will be made right and that Creation will be restored to its former perfection. However, He is also letting them know that this reconciliation will be one for the future, for His second coming but not for the time at hand. As believers in the present day, we can take solace that God has this in hand and that He will make all things right.

Conclusions

- Focus on Following: Do not let the weeds in your life be a source of distraction or derailing from the purpose God has given you.
- Jesus is Judge: Do not spend your time trying to decipher wheat from weed. Not only is this not your job but verse 29 reminds us that it will do more damage than good.
- Jesus is Lord: The weeds will not win in the end. We do not need to worry that God is not on His throne or that He does not care about the state of His Creation. He has a plan and will deal with the problem of evil, allowing righteousness to shine (v.42).
- Weeds into Wheat: Jesus is in the business of turning weeds into wheat, bad fish into good fish. While these parables are limited in that weeds obviously cannot change and become wheat, we know that God is able to transform lives. The following section even highlights this as He talks about turning scribes into followers (v. 52).

Discussion Questions:

1. How do you feel when you realize that there are people in the church who do not follow Christ in truth?
2. Have you examined the fruit of your life to see whether you are the wheat or the weed? The good or the bad fish?
3. What emotions are evoked when you realize that God intends to wait until the second coming to set all things right?
4. What are the ways you are distracted by weeds in your life?
5. How can we keep Christ the focus?

Kingdom Contrast: The Bridegroom, The Unshrunk Cloth, & New Wine

Matthew 9:9-17

by Steve Jones

Several years ago, I came home from work and was greeted with the news that our vacuum cleaner had died. Realizing how essential this appliance was to a house with so many people in it, but not having the money to buy a new one or pay someone to fix it, I took the vacuum out into the garage and decided to try to fix it myself. My rationale being: it can't get any more broken.

So, I took it to my tool bench and began to haphazardly remove screws. I got the thing partially dismantled when I was shocked to realize I saw what was wrong and how to fix it. I won't bore you with the details of the inner workings of a midsized, modestly priced vacuum cleaner, but suffice it to say, I had everything I needed to fix what was obviously broken.

After concluding the repair, I began to reassemble the vacuum cleaner. It was only then that I realized that I never believed for a second that I was going to actually fix the machine, much less need to put it back together. I began a slow process of holding a screw up and looking for a place it might go.

Eventually, I got the thing back into a single, self-contained piece. I stood up admiring my handwork and was just about to take it inside to be showered with praise by my adoring family when I noticed that there were three screws left over on the workbench.

What do you think I did? I plugged the vacuum in to see if it worked. Because if the thing worked, maybe I didn't need to go through the hassle of figuring out where those three screws belonged.

You know, many times we approach our faith that way. We treat the truths of Christianity like they are oddly shaped screws that we aren't sure where to place in our already put-together lives. So, we leave them on the workbench of our mind hoping we don't need them, hoping our lives will run just fine without them.

The problem is that faith in Jesus isn't some new accessory to be added to an already constructed life. Following Him means more than finding a way to fit Him into your old categories. It's about learning to shift your life and learning to see everything from His perspective.

That is why Jesus told Nicodemus, who had come to recruit Jesus for Team Pharisee, "Truly I tell you, unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3:3) That is also the reason Jesus tells the parables we are going to look at today.

The disciples of John come to Jesus confused about the behavior of the disciples, which didn't fit their expectations of how followers of the Messiah should act. The parables Jesus tells invite them and us to realize that entering the Kingdom of God means shifting our expectations and altering our categories. It means reordering everything around Jesus rather than trying to fit Him neatly into our own preconceived notions of where He should fit in our already-organized lives.

The Situation (vs9-14)

The question that prompts these three parables is posed in verse 14 by the disciples of John: "Then the disciples of John came to Him, asking, 'Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?'"

But if we look a few verses previous to verses 9-13, we see the larger context. Jesus has just called Matthew out of his old life as a tax collector to be a disciple. A large and boisterous party immediately followed which drew an evidently unsavory crowd and a series of uncomfortable responses.

⁹As Jesus went on from there, He saw a man called Matthew, sitting in the tax collector's booth; and He said to him, 'Follow Me!' And he got up and followed Him. ¹⁰ Then it happened that as Jesus was reclining at the table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were dining with Jesus and His disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, 'Why is your Teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?' ¹² But when Jesus heard this, He said, 'It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³ But go and learn what this means: 'I desire compassion, and not sacrifice,' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'"

Both the Pharisees and the disciples of John were scandalized by the actions of Jesus and His disciples. They were scandalized by the feast at Matthew's house. It didn't seem appropriate to either group. But what each group does with their bewilderment is important. In verse 11, the Pharisees direct their questions not to Jesus but to the disciples. The Pharisees don't want answers, they want to discredit Jesus in the disciples' eyes. John's disciples act differently. They go directly to Jesus with their questions. It shows they are honest seekers wanting answers and enlightenment. So instead of a stern lecture and dismissal like the one He gives the Pharisees in verse 12-13 (go and learn), Jesus gives the disciples of John three parables to reward their seeking and to invite them to step beyond their preconceived notions of what the Kingdom should be and how its citizens should act.

Before we look at the parables, it's important to note that the question they ask is a good one. Even John the Baptist himself was bewildered by Jesus and asked this question. In Matthew 11:2-3 he says, ²Now when John, while imprisoned, heard of the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to Him, 'Are you the expected one, or shall we look for someone else?'" The important thing to learn from this is that we need to make sure our hearts are soft, and we are open to hearing answers that might require us to change how we view things. We have to make sure we are asking like John's disciples rather than like the Pharisees.

Parable #1: Celebrating with the Bridegroom (v15)

The first parable Jesus tells uses the illustration of a wedding party to make His point. Jesus compares Himself to a bridegroom and His disciples to the groomsmen: "And Jesus said to them, 'The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.'"

- Jesus the Long-Awaited Bridegroom: It might sound like a bizarre leap to go from questions about fasting to talking about weddings, but the two are related. According to Jewish tradition, members of a wedding party were exempted from participating in fasts.

Jesus is saying that His followers need not fast because He is a bridegroom. Again, another bizarre statement. But, in truth, it's not bizarre as much as it is controversial. How is Jesus a Bridegroom? He isn't getting married. Remember the broader context of Him celebrating the call of Matthew with tax-gatherers and sinners. Jesus is saying that this constitutes as the fulfillment of the promise made in the Old Testament. In Hosea 2:19-20, God characterizes Himself as a bridegroom and describes His restoration of Israel as a betrothal: ¹⁹ "I will betroth you to Me forever; Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, In lovingkindness and in compassion, ²⁰ And I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. Then you will know the Lord."

In claiming to be the bridegroom, Jesus is subtly but clearly claiming to be the Messiah coming to restore His people. And because He is the Messiah/Bridegroom, His forgiveness of sinners is a part of the great restoration of Israel. His disciples can't help but celebrate. What the disciples were doing wasn't irreligious or careless; it was a new kind of religion, a new way of understanding what God is doing and how. Fasting comes from mourning but His disciples have no reason to mourn.

- **Jesus the Atypical Bridegroom:** Jesus continues the parables and takes it in another direction. He says that one day His disciples will have a reason to fast and mourn because He will be taken away from them. This does not mean that the groomsmen will mourn when the groom leaves with the bride. The whole purpose of the wedding is for that to happen. It is the culmination of the wedding celebration. The picture is more of someone breaking into a wedding and kidnapping the groom.

Jesus is saying that something even the groomsmen couldn't predict will happen and it will leave them devastated. The idea of the bridegroom being taken away might be combining the Hosea 2 passage mentioned above with Isaiah 53:8, in which the suffering servant of God who was crushed for our iniquity "was taken away." Thus, this parable becomes a prophecy of His crucifixion.

Jesus tells this parable to show that He is God sent to deliver them. But also, that who He is will challenge and stretch their concept of who God is and what they were expecting God to do. No one was expecting the Messiah to be a suffering servant, even though Isaiah 53 clearly spells it out. It didn't fit the categories they had in their own heads about how they expected God to intervene in their lives and deliver them.

Parable #2: Unshrunk Cloth on an Old Garment (v16)

Jesus has just told a shocking parable to the disciples of John. You can imagine them standing there wondering "what are we supposed to do with this new teaching?" or "where are we supposed to put this unexpected truth?" Jesus proceeds to tell two more parables about the need to start over and not to try to fit Him into their preconceived notions. The first is about a garment with a hole in it: "But no one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear results." (v16)

We have all had shirts that shrunk after the first wash. It is such an issue that many shirts today come "preshrunk." The weave of the cloth tightens with each wash causing the garment to contract. Now imagine a garment that was several years old that had shrunk all that it was going to because it had been washed countless times. If you tried to patch a hole in that garment with a piece of new cloth, the contracting of that new, unshrunk piece of cloth would make the hole even bigger.

There are at least two main points to this parable. First, we are all wearing garments with holes. Our lives are incomplete, and we know it. We are all looking for something. But more importantly, Jesus is telling us to stop trying to fix an old robe. Lay it down and put on something new.

Jesus is telling John's disciples and us not to use His teaching to patch a hole in an old robe. Take up His new robe instead. The old robe for the disciples was the Judaism of the period with its bad ideas about righteousness, goodness, and God. What are the old robes that we try to sew Jesus into? What robe is He calling us to lay down?

Parable #3: New Wine in Old Wineskins (v17)

If the last parable tells us what not to do, the parable He now tells shows us what to do: "Nor do people put new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out and the wineskins are ruined; but they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved." (v17)

People in the ancient world didn't know about yeast's role in fermentation. Yeast wasn't discovered until the 1800s. They knew that if you crushed grapes, over time it would turn into wine. We know now that this is because yeast naturally occurs on the skin of grapes. In fact, it's really hard to make grape juice without making wine. Grape Juice wasn't "invented" until the 1860's when a man named Thomas Welch (yep, of Welch's grape juice fame) figured out a way to use the newly discovered method of pasteurizing to halt the fermentation process.

The ancient world also didn't have barrels. There were two choices for storing wine. The first was in clay pots, which ended up making the wine taste like vinegar. The second was animal skins. An animal skin, normally a goat, would be tanned and sewn up so that it formed a goat-shaped bag with an opening where the neck was. New wine, the ancient word for unfermented wine, would be added to the skin. One of the by-products of the fermentation process is carbon dioxide. It's what makes champagne bubbly. It also creates pressure, as anyone who has ever opened a shaken soda can attest. As carbon dioxide gas would build, the leather of the wineskin would be able to stretch and expand. Eventually, though, an old wineskin would be dry and brittle on the outside. Like a balloon that had been blown up and deflated countless times, it can't take it anymore. The trick was trying to figure out when to stop putting new wine in the skin because if you didn't, you'd lose not just the wineskin but also the wine.

Jesus is trying to tell us that once His teaching gets inside of us, it will stretch us. It won't fit into the old wineskin of Pharisaical Judaism. It won't fit into our old wineskins either. We need to start over, start fresh, stop trying to fit Jesus into the mold, or box, or agenda that we have for Him and start being willing to adjust and expand our understanding, our expectation, and our vision to see what He is trying to show us.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the question that the Pharisees and John's disciples ask about Jesus? What is the difference in their motivations for asking? How do we sometimes ask questions like the Pharisees?
2. What is the significance of Jesus describing Himself as a bridegroom?
3. What does it mean that Jesus will burst our "old wineskins" when we try to fit Him into our system of doing things?
4. What categories or boxes do we try to fit Jesus into? How do we try to fit Him into our own version of politics, or patriotism, or even religion?
5. How can we kindly, politely, and compassionately help people see how they are putting Jesus in a box they made? How could someone show you that you were doing it?

Kingdom Concern: The Lost Sheep

Matthew 18:10-14

By Claire Mummert

Have you ever had someone in your life that ran from God for a time? Or maybe that person was you. You watched that person wander away and get further from God. Your heart hurt; your heart broke for that person. My next question is, how did you respond? Did you think about it one minute and then dismiss it in the next? Did you pray for them but take no action? My guess is that when most of us have someone near us that begins to stray from God, we chase them.

When someone close to me chose to pursue fame over God, I was deeply saddened. Not only did they travel the country seeking out this fame, but they also alienated their friends and family in the process. Being the next person to “make it” became their god. They became the kind of person who would do whatever it took to win, to succeed, to make progress. This led to a breaking within their family and eventually to their divorce when they would not come home, even for their husband. The road did not turn lighter or easier though. The road they took continued to get harder and was fraught with pain. They had to take on a menial job to make ends meet while audition after audition left them feeling worthless and overwhelmed. This worthlessness was taken up as their identity over time and helped them allow others in their life who took up this mantle, confirming their worthlessness.

Abusive relationships, toxic friendships. Pain on pain until one day they could not even afford their rent and they realized they had no one to turn to. No one. But a small light flickered in their mind. They remembered something their father had always told them. “When you are ready to make a change; when you see how this is not what’s best for you; when you need help, I’m here.” That was a constant refrain. This light began to grow in their mind, and they did the only thing they had left to do, they called their dad. And what did that father do? He immediately got on a plane and met them in that place. He picked his child off the floor and comforted them. He brought his child back home and began to help them rebuild their life.

Can you imagine the feeling of the family to have this person back home? It was a day of celebration! Someone who they had seen go through pain indescribable was finally back home and in the care of people who loved them. No more abuse. No more toxic pain. Only love, help, and guidance.

If we can imagine how this father feels for their child, and how great the celebration is when they returned, then we can certainly imagine that the Father feels much more for His children. Matthew 18 is describing how those in His kingdom who He sees as great are truly the most vulnerable, the littlest. Jesus then goes on to show His disciples what it means for us to care for one another, to care for the vulnerable, and the “little.” He wants the church to care for each other and care for the vulnerable among us in these three ways (love, pursuit, and celebration).

Love Each Other (v12)

Jesus kicks off this section of Scripture, reminding His disciples not to “despise one of these little ones.” But to understand verse 10, we need to look back to chapter 18 verse 1. The disciples have recently had a few of them singled out to see the Transfiguration and heard Peter confess that Jesus was Christ, getting affirmation from Christ. They have begun to squabble among themselves and have now come to Jesus to say, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Can’t you just see Peter stepping forward a little bit, ready to receive, since he loves to act before he thinks? But Jesus turns things upside down by pointing to a child and saying that whoever “humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (18:4). He goes on to let people know that when the church receives those who are vulnerable and humble, they receive Him. They take part in His work. So when Jesus, in verse 10, mentions that the disciples should not “despise

one of these little ones,” they are already aware of this idea and have been thinking about those within their congregation who are humble and vulnerable.

Jesus goes on to say that those people are seen by God. He wants to drive this point home by talking about the sheep and the shepherd. “If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?” (18:12). Jesus is showing how God cares deeply for “the one”, He loves them. Similarly, Jesus is calling The Church to love those who are “the one.” He expects that His people will love those who are vulnerable and go astray. That just as they are before the face of God, they would be in the hearts and minds of God’s children. That the Church would be conduits of grace and love.

I can promise you that when my friend went astray, they were in the minds of their family and friends always. There was not a day that they were not prayed for. But Jesus takes it one step further.

Pursue Each Other (v12-13)

Jesus did not want prayer to be the full extent of the church’s love for others, although it is vital and important. He wanted action. The shepherd “leave[s] the ninety-nine on the mountains and go[es] in search of the one that went astray” (18:12). The shepherd does not just call for the sheep and hope for the best, he steps forward in action. In John 10:14-15, Jesus uses a similar illustration where He is the shepherd. “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.” A shepherd will go to any length, even laying down their life, for the sheep. Jesus does that for us literally in the Crucifixion and Resurrection and asks that we exhibit that same love for one another. A sacrificial love.

This means that just as the shepherd goes after the lost sheep, we must be people of action. We are to pursue those who have gone astray, who are lost, who are vulnerable. We are not to be the disciples arguing over who is the greatest. We are meant to be humble and to be people who see those who need chasing. So many times, Jesus will walk to a crowd and the Bible says, “He saw the crowds, [and] He had compassion on them” (Matthew 9:36). This is a common refrain. He truly saw them, not just for their outer side but also for their inner need. He saw them and He had compassion. God is a compassionate God and a pursuer of people. He has pursued you and has put it in the hearts of His people to also be in pursuit. Abraham was told to make Israel a blessing to the nations (Genesis 12). Jesus tells His disciples, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Mark 1:17). This was always the plan and call for God’s people.

Celebrate Each Other (v13-14)

When my friend’s father pursued them and brought them home, we celebrated. We celebrated like someone dead had come back to life. Because they had! They had come back to life! Jesus says that when the shepherd brings back the one sheep “he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine” (18:13). It’s not that the ninety-nine were not important just like it was not that the others in that family were not important. But when someone has gone from death to life, from astray to home, from vulnerable to secure, God celebrates and so should His people.

In Luke’s telling of a similar parable to this one, it is followed by the Parable of The Lost Coin and The Parable of the Prodigal Son. In one, a coin has been lost and the woman tears apart her house until she finds it, then invites all of her friends and neighbors over for a party to celebrate finding the coin. God is saying that if you can feel that much joy over a coin, think of the joy God feels when His people come back to Him. Even more poignantly, I think, the story of the prodigal son is one where the son insults and spurns his father in favor of money. He squanders all the money and eventually returns, expecting to be received in disgrace but feeling that is better than the squalor he lives in now. The father surprises him though by humbling himself, running to his son, and celebrating. And he says to his servants that they will all celebrate “For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (Luke 15:24). God wants us to celebrate together the work that He is doing when those who have gone astray come back. He wants us to celebrate when that one of the ninety-nine is back with the flock.

So, while this is a parable where Jesus puts Himself as the shepherd and reminds us of how He feels for His children, it is also a model to us. It is an example of how believers should treat each other within the church, especially those who are vulnerable and have gone astray. He reminds us to love each other, pursue each other, and celebrate each other and thus create His vision of The Church.

Discussion Questions

1. Has someone in your life ever run astray? How did that make you feel? If you were the one astray, what did that side feel like? Discuss.
2. How can you love someone even when you disagree with their choices? Where are other places in Scripture where Jesus models this behavior for us?
3. Jesus pursued us unto death, how can we sacrificially pursue each other? Who are the hardest people to pursue in your life?
4. When it comes to celebrating, do you find this part easy or difficult? Why do we often feel the need for more punishment instead of celebration?
5. How do you think the mentioned Parable of the Prodigal Son and the reaction of the faithful brother shows the heart of us?

Kingdom Condition: The Unforgiving Servant

Matthew 18:23-35

by Steve Jones

“I can never forgive them for what they did.” Maybe you have heard someone say that. Maybe you have said it yourself. People who find themselves saying those words are usually in a place of profound betrayal or hurt. They have been wounded deeply, often by someone very close to them. Unfortunately, such statements demonstrate a fundamental misunderstanding of what forgiveness means and what Jesus says about who needs it.

We are going to look at a parable Jesus tells to help us see why and how we should forgive as well as the dangers of not forgiving others. But first, we need to make sure we understand what forgiveness actually means.

I remember being late for a meeting one time. I left early with more than enough time to account for many of the things that can happen in a commute. But there was an accident that closed the freeway for an extended period of time. This was pre-cell phone days, so I had no way of telling anyone where I was or why I wasn't showing up. When I finally arrived at the meeting, I informed the person I had left waiting as to the reasons why. The person said in response, “It's okay, I forgive you.” I stood there a little bewildered before mumbling something in reply. As I sat by myself afterward, I was bothered by that final exchange. I hadn't wronged the person. I hadn't been cavalier with my time or not taken our appointment seriously. I had planned to be early and had done all that I could to make it happen. What had prevented me was something extreme that I couldn't foresee or factor in. I hadn't wronged this person. I didn't need to be forgiven. I needed to have them accept my reasons for being late.

That was when I realized that there is a difference between forgiving someone and excusing them. If someone has a good reason for what they did, or a reasonable excuse, then accepting that reason isn't some great act of charity on your part; it's the right thing to do. The problem is that we often confuse forgiving with excusing. We think that we can only forgive someone if they have a good reason for what they did. And if they don't, then we can't forgive. In his essay, “On Forgiveness,” CS Lewis said it this way: “To excuse what can really produce good excuses is not Christian charity; it is only fairness. To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.”

Forgiveness is precisely for all of those things that people do that they have no good reason for doing to us. When a person says, “I can forgive a lot, but I just can't forgive them for that,” it usually means that they have finally found precisely the thing that forgiveness is intended for.

It's a hard thing to do. That is why Jesus tells the parable we are looking at today.

The Situation (v21-22)

In chapter 18, Jesus has been teaching about sin, reconciliation, and forgiveness. Matthew 18:15-20 is a famous passage about dealing with conflict in a Biblical way. On the heels of that discussion, Peter comes to Jesus and asks Him just how many times they were expected to forgive their brother for the same offense. Jewish law required that someone forgive the same sin three times. After that, forgiveness was no longer required. Peter, recognizing that Jesus expects more of His disciples, asks if they should forgive even more than the law requires. Verse 21 says, “Peter came and said to Him, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?’” He doubles what Jewish law requires and adds one. He is trying to go the extra mile in forgiving people.

In Verse 22, Jesus responds “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.” The Greek could mean seventy times seven or simply seventy-seven. However, the math isn’t the point. In Jesus’ day, seven was the number of completion. Jesus, by adding a 7 to Peter’s 7, was the equivalent of saying “times infinity.” He wants His disciples to realize that there should be no limits to our forgiveness. He then tells a parable that shows the foolishness of not forgiving others and provides direction about how to carry out this seemingly impossible command.

The Parable (v23-34)

The parable tells the story of a master settling accounts with his slaves. The focus of the parable is on two debts that are owed, and the two responses to people who are unable to pay. Sometimes we have a hard time with the scale and magnitude of things. We hear words over and over and think they mean similar things. For example, we hear the words million, billion, and trillion used so often regarding business and government that we forget how large these numbers are. We lose our sense of scale between them. We know that trillion is larger than billion and both are larger than million, but our brains have a hard time handling the actual scale. Consider this shocking illustration that puts the differences in perspective. A million seconds is 12 days. A billion seconds is 31 years. A trillion seconds is 31,688 years. Understanding that kind of scale is important for this parable. Two units of money are referenced here: talents and denarii. Understanding the difference between the two is key to understanding the parable. A denarius was the basic unit of pay in the ancient world. It roughly equaled one day’s wage for an average worker. A talent was equaled to around 6000 denarii. So, one talent was equal to roughly twenty years wages. Now look at the parable. Verse 24 says the first person owes a debt of ten thousand talents. This is an absurdly large amount equal to almost sixty million denarii. A man would have to work two hundred thousand years to pay that off. The other debt is large but not that large in comparison. 100 denarii, or 100 days wages, or 4 months’ pay. A lot of money on its own, but nothing in comparison to the other debt. It is kind of like the difference between million and trillion.

- **A Debt Forgiven (v23-27)** – When the master calls in the debt of the slave, the slave immediately begs for more time. In verse 26, it says, “the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.’” Once we realize just how much money the slave owed, we are supposed to laugh at the obviously stupid assertion he makes. He would never have enough time to pay his master back. He’d have to work every day for almost 200 millennia to make that money back. Verse 27 describes the three things the master does in response: “the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt.” The lord put himself in the slave’s shoes. That is what having compassion means. He released him from custody but not so that he could work to pay off the debt. He finally forgave the debt because he knew there was no way that the slave could repay.
- **A Debt Demanded (v28-30)** – After being freed from custody and from the burden of an unimaginably large debt, the forgiven slave goes out and finds a person who owes him money. 100 denarii isn’t a small sum, but it pales in comparison to the debt that had been forgiven. Verse 28 says the forgiven slave found a slave who owed him money and “he seized him and began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay back what you owe.’” Not just demanding his money back but choking him. In Verse 29, The debtor replies with the exact same words the forgiven slave had said to the master, “Have patience with me and I will repay you.” The claim doesn’t sound as ludicrous as it did when the forgiven slave said it earlier. But to no avail. Verse 30 says, “he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed.”
- **A Debt Reimposed (v31-34)** – The master hears of the forgiven slave’s lack of mercy and summons him. He tells him that he should have shown mercy because he had received mercy. In response, the master rescinds his forgiveness, reimposes the debt, demands payment, and, in verse 34 it says, “handed him over to the torturers.”

The Painfully Clear Point (v35)

Sometimes the point of the parables is hidden so that we have to wrestle and seek to understand. Not so in this case. Jesus makes His point very clear. Verse 35 is hauntingly clear and unequivocal: "My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart." There is no way around it. Jesus tells us we must forgive or we won't be forgiven. Remember the section of the Lord's Prayer which reads "Forgive us our debts as we also forgive our debtors (Matthew 6:12)." Well, right after that, in Matthew 6:14-15, Jesus makes His meaning abundantly clear. "For if you forgive men their transgressions, your heavenly father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your father will not forgive your transgressions."

What is Jesus saying here? That you can lose your salvation? I don't think so. Remember, the point of the parable is the point. The farther away you get from the central idea, the less sure ground you are standing on. The point of this parable is that forgiveness is central to the mission of Jesus. He offers us forgiveness of a sin debt that we could never repay and expects us to show similar love and compassion to others. A person who refuses to forgive should not expect to receive from God what he won't grant to his fellow man.

Jesus is also showing that we will only ever be able to forgive others as we come to understand how much we have been forgiven. Sometimes, we try to use the forgiveness God offers as sort of a cosmic get out of jail free card; or, like we want Rich Uncle God to pay off our sin credit card so that we can avoid all the negative consequences of our sin. But we don't actually want to change. Such thinking reveals that we don't fully understand the true magnitude of our own sin and haven't really sought to be forgiven. We want God to excuse, overlook, or let us off the hook. But God doesn't dismiss sin or deny sin, He deals with it. His forgiveness looks at our sin head on and deals with it, cancels our debt out of His love and compassion. This doesn't mean that we are supposed to wallow in our sin and beat ourselves up. We are supposed to respond with joy and worship towards God and with compassion and forgiveness for all those who have sinned against us. The wounds we feel and the wrongs we have suffered are serious. We shouldn't seek to minimize them. But as we experience the forgiveness of God, we will be able to extend it to others as well.

Discussion Questions

1. How do we sometimes misunderstand what forgiveness means? What is the difference between forgiving and excusing?
2. Have you ever said, or heard someone say, "I could never forgive that person?" Why is this something that a Christian should never say?
3. Why is it foolish of the first slave to offer to repay his debt to the master? Why did the first slave treat the second one so harshly? How do we act like the first slave both towards God and others?
4. What do you think about how the parable ends? What are the strong words that Jesus has for those who won't forgive others?
5. How can we come to understand the great debt Jesus paid for us without, at the same time, wallowing in the sin that He freed us from? What does it mean to forgive someone "from your heart?"

Kingdom Trust: Laborers in the Vineyard

Matthew 20:1-16

by Steve Jones

In 1982, William P. Kinsella wrote a book entitled *Shoeless Joe*, imagining a second coming of sorts for Shoeless Joe Jackson, a member of the infamous “Black Sox” so nicknamed for the 1919 Chicago White Sox team that lost the World Series on purpose. The book was subsequently made into a movie titled *Field of Dreams* starring Kevin Costner and James Earl Jones.

In the movie (because, to be honest, the movie is so good that I haven’t read the book), Kevin Costner’s character, a man named Ray, is inspired by visions and voices to build a baseball field in the middle of an Iowa cornfield. When he does, Shoeless Joe Jackson appears at his baseball field. Ray is then prodded to go on various quests across the country doing research, meeting people important to the story, and performing various good deeds all at the expense of his farm which is already struggling. When he returns, he discovers that other great players from baseball’s past have assembled at his field and are playing games each night before disappearing into the cornfield.

After being denied access to the cornfield, Ray confronts Shoeless Joe and tells him: “I did it all. I listened to the voices, I did what they told me, and not once did I ask what’s in it for me.” Shoeless Joe responds, “What are you saying, Ray?” Ray finally exclaims, “I’m saying... what’s in it for me?”

What’s in it for me? It’s a reasonable enough question to ask in most circumstances. None of us want to be taken advantage of or exploited. All of us want to know there will be some reward or payoff for our work. But if we aren’t careful, we can be so determined to make sure everything “pays off” that we become mercenary and turn everything into a negotiation, determined not to give one ounce of effort beyond what we deserve and have been compensated for. We can also be tempted to deal with God in the same way. We won’t obey until we discern an obvious reward for our labors. To counter this tendency, Jesus tells the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. He wants to encourage us to turn from a transactional relationship with God and learn to trust Him with our lives.

The Pretext (19:27-30)

The parable Jesus tells at the start of Matthew 20 begins with the word “for.” Words like that (and its close relative “therefore”) clue us in to the fact that what is about to be said is intricately connected with what was just said. As one Bible teacher once put it, “make sure you know what the “therefore” is there for.” In order to understand the parable, we need to look at the situation that moved Jesus to tell it. Another clue that we need to see these passages together stems from repeated words across these parables. In Matthew 19:30, Jesus concludes with the point, “But many who are first will be last; and the last, first.” The parable Jesus then goes on to tell ends with the same point in Matthew 20:16, “So the last shall be first, and the first last.”

So, what has just happened? Jesus had the encounter with the Rich Young Ruler (Matthew 19:16-26). The encounter actually has two parts. First, Jesus tells a wealthy man that his riches are getting in his way of finding eternal life. Jesus encourages him to sell everything he has and then come follow Him. The man can’t do it because he has tremendous wealth. But that isn’t the end. Jesus then turns and addresses those with Him who have watched this encounter. In Matthew 19:24, He summarizes the encounter by saying, “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” Such a statement was scandalous to the eyes of a Jew. God had blessed them with the land of Israel. Those who possessed more of it were seen as more blessed by God. That is why the disciples were confused. Matthew 19:25 says, “When the disciples heard this, they were very astonished and said, “Then who can be saved?”

On the heels of that, Peter comes to Jesus and asks in verse 27, “Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?” Peter is trying to wrestle with how Jesus is turning everything on its head. But he is also asking the semi-selfish question “what’s in it for me?” Jesus tells him not to worry about the reward but simply trust God for the outcome.

To reinforce this point, Jesus tells the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard.

The Parable (20:1-16)

- **Hiring the Workers (v1-7)** – The Parable starts with a landowner going to hire laborers to bring in his harvest. This was a common occurrence in many parts of the world until very recently. People would congregate in a central area where employers would come and hire who they needed for the day. In fact, many cities to this day still have day-laborer sites for this purpose. After making a business deal with the people he hired, he sends them into the field. The amount he agrees on is very reasonable. One denarius was the standard pay for a day’s work.

Three hours later, the landowner needed more workers, so he goes back to the town square and finds some workers “standing idle in the marketplace.” He sends them to the field but doesn’t make a formal contract with them, simply saying, “whatever is right I will give you.” Perhaps they understood it to mean that the landowner would calculate the percentage of pay they deserved for the portion of the day they had work. The landowner does this two more times at three-hour intervals.

Finally, with one hour left in the work day, the landowner goes back to the marketplace and finds men standing around. This time he asks them in verse 6, “Why have you been standing here idle all day long?” They respond in verse 7, “Because no one hired us.” There are two things that are important to see about this exchange. First, the workers are clearly lying. This is the fourth extra trip the landowner has made to the market that day. On each of the previous trips, he hired the men he saw standing idly. These men didn’t want to work. They were making excuses. They hadn’t been in the market at the earlier instances. A second thing to notice is that this time the landowner doesn’t agree to pay them, but simply sends them in the field to work, “You go into the vineyard too.” Besides, what could they have expected to receive for having worked so little?

- **Paying the Workers (v8-10)** – Jewish law required that wages be paid out each day. Leviticus 19:13 says, “You shall not oppress your neighbor, nor rob him. The wages of a hired man are not to remain with you all night until morning.” So, the landowner lines everyone up and starts paying everyone starting with those he hired last. He chooses to give them a full day’s pay. He does this with all the workers who only worked a portion of the day. Naturally, the people who worked all day are watching this happen and are expecting to receive more, but instead, receive the same as everyone else.
- **Dealing with Disgruntled Workers (v11-15)** – The workers who worked all day are upset that they have been paid the same as those who worked only an hour. They want to know why. The landowner tells them that he has done nothing wrong. They had an agreement between the two of them, and he has honored it. He has simply chosen to be generous with the other people. The problem was not his but theirs. They were being envious.

The Point: Trust not Transaction

It’s hard to finish reading the parable without having a vague sense of unease. It really doesn’t seem fair. Why didn’t the landowner give more to those who worked all day? Their complaint seems reasonable and justified. It is important to realize that the feeling of unease is the desired response to the parable. Parables are sometimes supposed to be a punch in the gut. We are supposed to be left with the feeling that something doesn’t seem right. When we feel this way, we need to realize that we are being invited to wrestle with the parable in an attempt to figure out what Jesus is talking about.

First, let's dismiss some things that aren't going on. Jesus isn't stating a universal business principle that Christians should follow. He isn't saying that Christian bosses should pay their workers disproportionately. He also isn't making the point that God is in charge and can do what He wants, and therefore chooses to be strict with some and generous with others.

The clue to unraveling this parable can be found in the agreement that the first workers made with the landowner. They bargained. They negotiated. They haggled with the landowner. They shook hands over an agreed upon price for their labor before they went to work. The other groups went to work trusting in the good faith and honesty of the man that had sent them to work.

Jesus is showing us that life in His kingdom is built on trust not on a transaction. Many people approach Christianity as a transaction. What do I have to do to get God on my good side? How much is it going to cost me? After all I did for God, why didn't He do this, or why did He allow this?

Transaction was the standard approach to religion in the ancient world. Ancients believed that worship and sacrifice were ways of getting the gods' attention and bribing them to act on one's behalf. It was important, they thought, to make as big a sacrifice as you could afford otherwise the gods might not take notice of you. But there was also the expectation that the gods would do what they were told. It was a transaction. If the gods were given a huge sacrifice then failed to live up to their end of the bargain, then the next time the person might go to a different temple, or even demand back the cost of their "wasted" sacrifice.

It might sound like a far-fetched or even foolish way to approach God, but the truth is many of us do similar things. When bad things happen, we wonder what we did to deserve this. When the good things we desire are out of our reach, we wonder what we need to do for God to give us the good things we desire out of the world. When we sacrifice for God, we want to know what the pay-off is going to be. Go back to Peter's statement to Jesus in Matthew 19:27, "what will there be for us?"

Jesus is telling us to stop trying to figure out what you will be paid for your service and trust that God will take care of you. Jews, specifically the Pharisees, approached righteousness the way the other Ancient cultures did and the way the first laborers in the parable did. They kept lists, checked boxes, and tried to show God as well as the world how righteous they were in an attempt to merit and earn the blessing of God. Jesus said of them in Matthew 5:20, "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." And in Matthew 6:5, "Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full."

The reason we are transactional is because we don't trust. We want to know exactly how much things cost and don't want to be ripped off or taken advantage of. We are determined to get what we are owed and are ready to file grievances. But perhaps there is something more hidden in this parable. Why did the landowner have to keep going back to hire more workers? Is it because the first batch of workers weren't as hard working as they claimed? Were the other workers there to fill up what was lacking in the first group's labor? We all identify with the first group of laborers and think our hard work is being taken advantage of. But the truth is that we are all in the last category, people who have no excuse for our failures and have no option other than to depend on the generosity of our Lord.

God is inviting us to step away from our transactional approach to our relationship with Him and learn to trust. To write Him a blank check with our lives, our talents, our time, our treasure, and believe that He won't mispend or waste or ruin our life. We will never be able to do it until we trust not just that He is powerful and can do what He wants, but that He is completely good, profoundly gracious, and extravagantly generous. He is a good father who knows how to give good gifts to His children.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever had your work stolen or your labor taken advantage of? Have you ever felt compelled to make sure every part of an agreement was spelled out?
2. Have you ever said “what’s in it for me?” to someone? Why? Have you ever said something like that to God?
3. What does it mean to approach our relationship with God as a transaction?
4. Have you ever written a blank check before? What does it mean to write God a blank check with your life? Why is it hard to do?
5. How can we learn more about God’s character so that it is easier to trust Him? What does it mean that God is generous?

Kingdom Call: The Wedding Feast

Matthew 22:2-14

By Claire Mummert

When I am invited to a party, the first thing I do is wonder how should I dress? This creates a bit of party anxiety in me. The fancier the party, the greater the anxiety. Maybe you are the kind of person that frequently goes to parties that require cocktail attire or formal attire, but, for most of us, this is not common. Even after I have chosen what to wear, I worry that I will not look like or feel like I belong. I worry that I will be overdressed or underdressed. I worry about whether I will know someone there. I constantly am unsure whether I deserve to be at this party.

Take a moment to imagine, then, how I felt this first time I was invited to a company party that was labeled “cocktail attire.” I was pregnant with my first child and neither my husband nor I had any clue what to wear or how we would obtain the right clothes since our budget was very tight. I sent out the proverbial bat signal to all of my friends and ended up with a bed piled with dresses that I needed to try on. Never ask a pregnant woman to try on clothes, it will inevitably end in tears. So, as I cried my way through this pile of dresses, my husband tried on his only suit and worried over which tie paired well with his shirt. We felt the pressure to impress this company that was still new to us. I was not sure if I was dressed appropriately. I had never met any of my husband’s co-workers before, and I was not sure I would be able to keep any food down during the evening. I was sure that I would not belong.

However, when I arrived, I found that the outfit I chose was acceptable, and one woman even gave me a compliment. Many people seemed to also feel the nerves about small talk, but we got through it. I was able to talk well with one or two people and I did not embarrass myself. I began to think that maybe I did belong here after all.

In the parable of the wedding feast, there is a group that is supposed to be at the feast and a group that is not supposed to be there. There is the invited group who knows the rules and who belongs in this situation, then there was the group who attended who had neither of those assurances. Jesus is trying to help the Pharisees see that the Jews have been invited to the party and pursued by the King, but they have rejected Him. He is also trying to show them that this rejection will make way for a new group of people to have access to God’s kingdom.

The Jews were invited by Jesus (v1-4)

In the Ancient Near East, it was a common practice to invite people to your wedding and get their confirmation but then later send another invitation when the feast was prepared. This was not the wedding of today where there is a ceremony and a reception, taking up a few hours of your time at most. A wedding feast at the time would have taken days and been quite the celebration. It would have included the best wine and food that the family could afford.

Further, an invitation from a king would not truly be him asking for their attendance but requiring it. It would not only have been rude but possibly even dangerous to refuse. When the king invited you to attend something, you attended.

In this parable, a king gave a wedding feast for his son and “sent out his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding feast, and they were unwilling to come” (22:2-3). These are guests who would have already been invited and confirmed but are refusing to come now that the feast has actually been prepared. The king has already gone to the trouble to buy the food for everyone who has confirmed their attendance and now is left with no one. But he does not initially give up. He sends his servants a second time. He has them

say to the guests, "Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are all butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast" (22:4). He is explaining to these guests that the banquet will be incredible, and it is ready now, not later. He does not ask; he tells them to come.

Jesus is not masking the truth of this parable; it is quite clear. The people who are invited to the banquet are the Jews, the Israelites, God's chosen people. God has already sent them an invitation to the Kingdom in the form of their forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He has promised them from Genesis 3 to the present that He will be their God if they will follow Him. He has promised them that there will be a day when He sends Messiah to redeem them and write His Word on their hearts. They have already accepted the initial invitation. Yet, throughout Scripture, we see Israel turn from God. We have the period of the judges where God sends people to judge Israel and turn them back to Him. We have the period of the prophets where God tells them that they need to mend their ways, or they will be exiled. He pursues them and sends His servants to remind them about the Kingdom, the banquet. In the New Testament, He will even send His own son to invite them to the Kingdom and to tell them that the time has come for them to be a part of the banquet. The Jews rejected Jesus (v5-7)

The king in this parable is not met with guests when the servants return. The invited guests "...paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business, and the rest seized his slaves and mistreated them and killed them" (22:5-6). Despite being invited by the king, the guests think only about their desires and their agendas. They do not think about who has invited them or the consequences of their actions.

As God pursues the Jews, He gives them exactly what He promised, Messiah. He gives them His suffering servant in Jesus and invites them to His banquet, into His Kingdom. But the Jews do not know Him, did not recognize Him, and were so wrapped up in their own agenda about who the Messiah would be that they missed Jesus. Jesus was standing right here telling this parable to the Pharisees and they did not catch it. They wanted to rule the Jews and be applauded for their piety. They wanted a savior who would come and overthrow Rome, making Israel a political powerhouse. They would eventually follow the pattern of these guests, mistreating and killing God's servant. Jesus would go to the cross at the hand of the people He came to save. "Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone...'" (Matthew 21:42).

It should not be lost on us that in Luke, this parable is followed by a section commonly labeled "The Cost of Discipleship". Jesus would go on to say that in order to be a part of His Kingdom, people must "hate [their] own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple" (Luke 15:26). Being a part of God's kingdom will have a cost and it will require that people do not think about their own wants as the first and foremost priorities of their lives. They will have to be willing to follow Christ above all else.

And while the king in Matthew's parable will be enraged, sending his armies against those who mistreated his servants, God will take a different path. God will allow His servant to die. God will allow Him to be mistreated to the highest degree and made the lowliest. He will find triumph in His servant's destruction of death and sin, a much greater victory, and a more permanent path to a relationship with the King as well as entrance into His Kingdom. Jesus will then be elevated (Philippians 2:1-11) and will sit with the King as The Son. The Gentiles were invited by Jesus (v8-14)

When the king sees that none of the invited guests will attend, he tells the servants to go "to the main highways, and as many as you find there, invite to the wedding feast" (22:9). The king would not let the banquet be wasted and he knew that there were others who would want to come to the feast. I can only imagine what it would have felt like to be a person in this situation. They may have been homeless or traveling or some other situation, but they were definitely not people who would feel worthy to come to this feast. They would feel like I did attending the company party with my husband. They would not have had fine clothes or possibly known all the proper rules for this kind of banquet, but they did know one thing – when the king asks you to come, you come. They would have felt the honor of it and made haste.

When the Jews reject Jesus and the Kingdom, the good news begins to spread to a new people. It spreads to the Gentiles. Jesus even spent time talking with a Samaritan woman, inviting her into the kingdom! The Jews were not prepared for all of these people they had deemed unclean and uninvited to be allowed to come to the banquet. This would not have even been in their minds as an option. Yet, though this was not the plan of the king in the parable all along, this was always the plan of the Heavenly Father. Israel was meant to be a light on a hill for the nations, drawing them to The True King. Abraham is meant to bless the nations through Israel in Genesis 12. Over and over the kings are told to be a light to the nations, showing them that their God is the One True God. God always intended to invite the Gentiles to the party; the rejection of Jesus by the Jews only paved the way.

Similar to the parable of the sower from earlier in Matthew, God is inviting us to be a part of His Kingdom. The question is, how will we respond? Will we respond like the Jews and hold the Gospel close to the vest, keeping His promises for ourselves? Or will we be missional, taking the Gospel to all nations and all peoples? The call of Christ is to throw the wedding feast and include everyone from the beginning. In Christ, the invitation is for us and we are to be the servants, handing out invitations to each and every person we encounter.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the blind spots in our lives that make it difficult for us to accept Jesus' invitation to relationship with God?
2. What sacrifices do we need to make in order to allow God to be the ruler of our lives?
3. Do you resonate more with the Jews that struggled to give up their notion of Messiah or the Gentiles who felt ill-equipped when invited to the Kingdom?
4. Do you truly feel ready to invite everyone to the table of Christ? Are there biases or preconceived notions you need to confront?
5. How are you becoming a servant of Christ and taking His invitations to those He puts into your path?

Kingdom Stewardship: Parable of the Talents

Matthew 25:14-30

By Steve Jones

JRR Tolkien was a 20th century Christian professor, scholar, and author. He was a close friend of CS Lewis and played an instrumental part in his conversion to Christianity. Tolkien is chiefly known for his book trilogy called the Lord of the Rings, which tells the story of a small, insignificant little Hobbit entrusted with the monumental task of destroying a magic and evil ring of power. If you haven't read the books, you should. As I said, Tolkien was a Christian. In this work, he wrestles with the problem of evil and the ways imperfect people try to do the right thing.

There is one scene in the book that I have always loved. Don't worry, no spoiler alert necessary. I am not giving away a major plot point. The journey to destroy the ring takes the fellowship to a city named Gondor. Gondor is a city that has not had a king in a very long time. The kings departed promising to return but never did. Instead, the city is led by a man with the title of Steward. He isn't the king; instead he stewards the city on behalf of the king. He doesn't sit on the King's Throne, instead the Steward sits on a chair at the base of the floor in front of stairs that lead up to the actual throne. The problem is that the kings have been gone so long, the stewards see themselves as the real rulers. In fact, when faced with the rightful king who is returning, the son of the Steward remarks, "Gondor has no king. Gondor needs no king."

Though you might be lost in the complications of a fictitious fantasy world, the attitudes reflected by the stewards of Gondor are similar to those expressed by every human heart. What started as stewardship devolves into ownership. All of us have received our lives as gifts from God to be stewarded on His behalf. But we all quickly claim ownership and forget our obligations to our true King.

That is the problem at the heart of the parable we are looking at today. Jesus tells a parable about a master who entrusts valuable gifts of varying degrees to three slaves. What they do with it while the master is away and how the master responds when he returns shows us the right and wrong ways to see our role as stewards of God's gifts to us.

Pretext:

Like most other parables, the broader context is important for understanding why Jesus told the parable and ultimately what its point is. This parable occurs as the last of four parables following His extended teaching about the Destruction of the Temple and the coming of His Kingdom.

The Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24:1-41) – The 24th chapter of Matthew is frequently called the "Olivet Discourse" because Jesus teaches while sitting on the Mount of Olives.

In the last week before Jesus was crucified, Jesus and His disciples came and went from the city each day. One day, as He was going out of the temple, His disciples were marveling at the amazing architecture of the Temple, which had been beautifully and painstakingly restored by Herod the Great in a renovation that, according to John 2:20, took 46 years to complete. Jesus startles them by prophesying the temple's complete destruction in Matthew 24:2, "Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down."

Jesus and the disciples left the temple and journeyed out of the city down through the Kidron Valley and up to the Mount of Olives. The disciples, perhaps while taking a rest, look back over the valley and the temple and ask Jesus to explain His statement back in the temple. Matthew 24:3 says: "As He was sitting on the Mount of

Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?”

The disciples ask Jesus to tell them the answers to 3 questions: “when will the Temple be destroyed, when will He return, and when will the end of the age happen?” What follows is the answer Jesus gave to that question. It cannot be underlined enough times: a fair amount (but not all) of what Jesus says in Matthew 24 is about the future destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, which occurred just as Jesus predicted thirty years later in 70 AD.

Three Previous Parables: Following on the heels of the Olivet Discourse, Jesus gives three parables to help guide us into responding appropriately to His teaching about the destruction of the temple and about the future coming of His kingdom.

- The First parable Jesus gives is about the Fig Tree (Matthew 24:32-33). A fig tree produces leaves and fruit at the same time. When you see leaves, you can expect fruit. Jesus is telling His disciples to watch the signs and be ready. The time for the destruction of the temple will be obvious.
- The Second Parable is about the Faithful and Unfaithful slaves (Matthew 24:42-51). The parable tells the story of a master gone for a long time. One slave thinks this gives him freedom to indulge his desires and to act cruelly to his fellow slaves. Jesus is telling His disciples that while they wait for His return, they should focus on being obedient rather than living sinfully.
- The Third parable is about Ten Maidens and their lamps (Matthew 25:1-13). They are wedding attendants and are waiting for the return of the bridegroom. The maidens bring lamps to light the way for the groom when he returns. Five of them don't expect it to be too long, so they don't bring any extra oil. The other five have brought extra oil and are therefore prepared for the bridegroom to take longer in returning. Jesus is teaching His disciples that His coming kingdom will be longer in arriving than they are perhaps anticipating.

The Parable (Matthew 25:14-29)

The clue that we are supposed to read this parable along with the previous one is found in the first few words. This parable begins in v14 with simply, “For it is just like...” What does “it” refer to? We are supposed to supply the missing phrase “the kingdom of God,” which was how the previous parable started. In addition, the word “for,” as we saw in the previous parable, connects what follows with what preceded.

- Funds Distributed (v14-18) – The parable starts pretty simply. A man goes on a long journey and entrusts his possessions to his slaves for safe keeping. Three slaves specifically are mentioned. Each receive varying amounts: five talents, two talents, and one talent. Remember from the parable of the talents, a talent is a unit of weight used in measuring large amounts of precious metals. It corresponds to roughly 6000 denarii. One denarius is an average day's pay. So, a talent is roughly 20 years' worth of income for the average worker. We are also told what each man did with the money. The first two invested the money and doubled it. The last one, instead of investing, “dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. (v18)”
- Settling Accounts with the First Two Men (v19-24) – After a long time, the master returns and settles accounts with his slaves. The encounters with the first two men follow a pattern. The slave presents the master's money and the profit that was made. The master praises each man's faithfulness and offers him more responsibility, then invites him to “enter into the joy of your master.”
- Settling Accounts with the Last Man (v24-30) – The parable hinges on the master's encounter with the last man, who did not trade with the money given him but simply buried it. The slave attempts to justify his actions by saying he was afraid of the master and by extension accusing the master of

being dishonest. In verses 24-25, he says, ²⁴Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed. ²⁵And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours.”

The master responds angrily in Matthew 25:26-27, ²⁶You wicked, lazy slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I scattered no seed. ²⁷Then you ought to have put my money in the bank, and on my arrival, I would have received my money back with interest.”

Many readers initially seem startled by what seems like the master’s overreaction to a scared slave’s timid business dealings. But there is more to the third man’s words than appear on first glance. In a similar passage in Luke 19:22, the master adds: “By your own words I will judge you.” The master isn’t agreeing with the slave’s assessment of his business practices, he is accusing this slave of lying to him. The master is saying, “If that is who you thought I was, you would have at least put the money in the bank and earned a little bit of interest on it.” The fact that he didn’t do that reveals that the motivation for his actions lie elsewhere.

The clue to the third man’s real motivations are found in the description of the place he is condemned to. In verse 30, the place is described as full of “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Weeping obviously means a place of intense sadness. “Gnashing of teeth” means to hiss or growl at somebody with clenched jaw. The most common emotions associated with gnashing of teeth are anger and jealousy. The reason the third man acted the way he did was anger, spite, and jealousy. Perhaps he was mad that he didn’t get as much as the first two. Perhaps he resented having to work for someone else’s profit. When he calls the master a hard man, the slave is saying that he wouldn’t see any profit if he was successful but would experience punishment if he failed. He buried it, then spent the time the master was gone doing his own thing.

The Point

So, what is Jesus teaching us in this parable? Coming at the end of His teaching about His return, there are obvious lessons about realizing His return will not occur for a while (the master was gone a long time). This parable focuses on how we live our life while we wait for the full advent of Jesus’s coming Kingdom. Here are a few ideas that this parable brings out.

- **Stewardship** – A steward doesn’t own anything but rather administers what he has been entrusted with on behalf of its true owner. It is ridiculous for a steward to think that he owns what he has been entrusted with or to think he has earned it. In 1 Corinthians 4:7, Paul writes to some people who had this problem, “For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?” Everything about our lives is stewardship. It is foolish of us to think we deserve what God has given us to steward. Everything we have and everything we are is on loan from God. The moment we forget this, bad things start to happen.
- **Possession**: A mistake people sometimes make regarding stewardship is that we are working for someone else and will never have our own stuff. That is what the third man got wrong. He thought that when the master came the master would take the initial investment as well as all the profit, so he hid the money and did his own thing. But the third man was wrong. Look at what the master says in verse 28 when he condemns the third man: “Take away the talent from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents.” These words are interesting. The first man gave all ten talents back to the master when he returned. The master evidently let him keep all ten, because he still has them at the end of the parable. It shows us a valuable lesson about possession. Nothing we try to do apart from God will ever amount to anything in the long run. Nothing we try to hold on to will ever truly be ours. The only things that will ever be truly ours will be those things we did for God and His kingdom as well as the things which we cheerfully consider gifts from Him and belonging to Him.
- **Reward** – Sometimes people don’t work because they are worried that the reward will be greater

responsibility and more work. Though that is part of what the master gives the faithful slaves, it is not the primary thing. To the first two men, the master concludes their interview with the phrase, “enter into the joy of your master.” The master isn’t trying to exploit them or use them. In offering them a stewardship, he is offering them a pathway to joy. The last man doesn’t realize this and tries to find joy and fulfillment on his own apart from his master. We do the same thing. We think the commands of God are obligations designed to ruin our lives or exploit our labor. But the truth is they lead to joy. We make the mistake of the third man when we try to find, on our own, in our own way, the joy the master is offering us through stewardship and obedience. CS Lewis summed this up in *Mere Christianity* when he wrote, “God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.”

- Comparison – The place where this slave is cast is a place where everyone is sad and angry at the same time. He is sad at his lot, at his position. He is also jealous of what others have and he lacks, so he is put in a place full of people like him where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. The source of the problem is comparison. Theodore Roosevelt once said, “Comparison is the thief of joy.” As long as you compare yourself to others, you will always either find reason to be arrogant or to be angry. Normally it’s the latter. We compare what is going wrong in our lives with what is going right with someone else’s and become jealous. We want what they have. We maybe even think we deserve it more. We get angry at ourselves, others, and God for sticking us where we feel stuck and giving us less than other people. Everybody thinks there is something wrong with their life. Most of us think that the problem would be solved if we were somewhere else, doing something else, with someone else. The way forward, though, is not to sink down in jealousy and comparison but through stewardship and obedience to try to do what we can, with what we have, where we are. This parable promises that when we do so, we will be entrusted with more and we will find lasting joy.

Discussion Questions:

1. What did the third man do wrong? How do we sometimes act in a similar way?
2. What does stewardship mean? What are the responsibilities of stewardship? How do stewardship and possession relate to one another?
3. Have you ever felt penalized for your hard work by being given more work? What is different about what the master offers each faithful slave? What can we learn from this?
4. What does “weeping and gnashing of teeth” mean? Have you ever responded to a situation with those emotions?
5. How do we compare ourselves to others? What damage does it do? How can we learn to stop?