

Lessons on the Parables of Christ

Taken from the Gospels

John Hendershot

Text copyright © 2013 John C. Hendershot

All Rights Reserved

Cover: *The Good Samaritan*, Rembrandt. Public Domain.

Dedication

To the memory of John B. and Lillian V. Hendershot – who taught us to “pass
it on.”

Table of Contents

Parables of the Kingdom - Various Scriptures

Life in Hell - Luke 12:16-21; Luke 16:19-31

Forgiveness - Luke 7:36-50

The Good Samaritan - Luke 10:25-37

The Nature of Christ - Various Scriptures

Individual Prophecy - Various Scriptures

Parables on Prayer - Luke 18:1-14

National Prophecy

Christian Life - Various Scriptures

End Times - Various Scriptures

Parables of the Kingdom - Various Scriptures

The Art of the Parable

The parable did not originate with Jesus; it is, however, closely associated with his teaching.

There are a number of reasons for this:

- ✦ Perhaps most obvious is this: they're easy to remember. The human brain is not like a file system — more like an attic, rather cluttered.
- ✦ The parable engages your own experience. When Christ speaks of the wheat and tares, every gardener knows what he's talking about.
- ✦ Parables are simple; anyone can understand them. Sometimes, however, people choose not to understand.
- ✦ Parables promote self examination. The moral of the story is always rather a little bit sly, and sneaks up on you.
- ✦ Sometimes the parable is used to say something in public which will be explained in private. Thus Christ can leave us his teaching without deliberately offending the Pharisees.
- ✦ Perhaps most ingenious of all, the parable is open to multiple interpretations. Sometimes it means this; other times it means that; and sometimes it means both.

To What Shall I Compare

We may begin with some of the simpler parables. Today's subject is the parables of the kingdom of God.

Leaven

Luke 13:20-21 NASB And again He said, "To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? (21) "It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of flour until it was all leavened."

The reader will please note that leaven, in the Old Testament, is often a symbol of sin. To avoid confusion, we shall simply state that it does not so apply here.

This is one of those scary little parables. It seems so simple yet he can mean one of many things:

- ✦ Some view this little parable as meaning that the church is the conscience of society. It's a traditional interpretation. However, I must ask: do we really function as the conscience of our society? Do we make any effort to do so?
- ✦ Perhaps more plausible is this: by the power of the Holy Spirit, the small of the church grow more numerous — but not in a highly visible way. This is important if you consider our standard methods of evangelism for our time. As we shall see later, immediate success does not necessarily mean great growth in the church.
- ✦ But there is yet a third interpretation. It also shows that the small in the church can produce great things. It is a warning therefore to the Christian that something will be expected from those who were given little.

Seed Grows Secretly

Mark 4:26-29 NASB And He was saying, "The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; (27) and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows--how, he himself does not know. (28) "The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade,

then the head, then the mature grain in the head. (29) "But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

This parable has been known to puzzle Christians mightily. The truth of the parable, taken literally, is quite obvious. This is how plants grow. The key to understanding this parable is the statement that the sower of the seed does not know how it grows. In the kingdom of God, stuff happens. You don't know how it works; it just does. The concept of the "divine appointment" is familiar to most mature Christians. Why does God work this way?

- ✦ It helps to prevent pride from rising — or at least complacency. When you are aware that you could not have done it your self, but God must have been involved — you have a truer picture.
- ✦ Some of us need a little instruction in this, but it's true. When you see things like this, you know you are blessed.
- ✦ Perhaps most important of all is this: the newcomer will see the hand of God — as long as we don't take credit for it.

Mustard Seed

Matthew 13:31-32 NASB He presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; (32) and 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."

This parable presents another fact about the kingdom of God. Most of us recognize that the church starts small, grows slowly but firmly. That's the normal growth pattern to a church. But its growth is not entirely directed at numbers. Bigger is not necessarily better, if you are not fulfilling the purpose of the church. There are several such purposes; the one which is pointed out here is that the church is to be a haven. Our medieval ancestors would have recognized this explicitly; a church was a place in which a fugitive could take refuge. There is a difference between a church which is a very popular health club for saints, and one which is a hospital for sinners. It is well to know which you are.

The Sower

Mark 4:1-20 NASB He began to teach again by the sea. And such a very large crowd gathered to Him that He got into a boat in the sea and sat down; and the whole crowd was by the sea on the land. (2) And He was teaching them many things in parables, and was saying to them in His teaching, (3) "Listen to this! Behold, the sower went out to sow; (4) as he was sowing, some seed fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate it up. (5) "Other seed fell on the rocky ground where it did not have much soil; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of soil. (6) "And after the sun had risen, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. (7) "Other seed fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. (8) "Other seeds fell into the good soil, and as they grew up and increased, they yielded a crop and produced thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold." (9) And He was saying, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." (10) As soon as He was alone, His followers, along with the twelve, began asking Him about the parables. (11) And He was saying to them, "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables, (12) so that WHILE SEEING, THEY MAY SEE AND NOT PERCEIVE, AND WHILE HEARING, THEY MAY HEAR AND NOT UNDERSTAND, OTHERWISE THEY MIGHT RETURN AND BE FORGIVEN." (13) And He *said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? How will you understand all the parables? (14) "The sower sows the word. (15)

"These are the ones who are beside the road where the word is sown; and when they hear, immediately Satan comes and takes away the word which has been sown in them. (16) "In a similar way these are the ones on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; (17) and they have no firm root in themselves, but are only temporary; then, when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately they fall away. (18) "And others are the ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns; these are the ones who have heard the word, (19) but the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. (20) "And those are the ones on whom seed was sown on the good soil; and they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold."

It is convenient to analyze this parable in terms of the three less than fruitful soils on which the seed fell.

Path

CS Lewis had his devil, Screwtape, once pronounce that humans think the demons do their best work by putting things into their minds. Not so; it's by keeping them out that they prosper. Satan actively seeks to prevent the gospel from ever entering anyone's life.

He gets a lot of help in this. We live in a time when cynicism is rampant. Indeed you might hear the objections these ways:

- ✚ "I'm glad that works for you." The postmodern world is happy for you to be a Christian – as long as you don't try to spread the idea that there is such a thing as absolute truth. Then things get sticky.
- ✚ "I've never inquired, and I don't need to." So it is that man, the emperor of his own soul, dismisses the truth as being inconvenient. We simply can't be bothered with it.
- ✚ The root cause, of course, is pride. Pride develops a hardness of heart that makes it easy to reject any overture of love.

Rocks

Those of us living in the American West are quite familiar with the tumbleweed. It is almost the iconic symbol of the loneliness of the desert. It may surprise you to find the tumbleweed to have a root system; it's just their way of using it. The tumbleweed grows quite quickly but when it gets to a certain size its connection to the roots snaps. It's the tumbleweed's way of spreading out. It's also a good example of what happens to those of us who never really get connected to the church just quite right.

You will see an initial enthusiasm, often a very great enthusiasm. What you may not realize is that great enthusiasm is their natural, normal response to a new offer of meaning in life. Your author once had an employee who bounced from one good thing to the next (including salvation by country Western dancing). The first three weeks perhaps even month were spent in boundless enthusiasm for the new method which filled her conversation. Then something happened, some little pressure of the day and she immediately reversed course and began looking all over again for the next new thing. It is very frustrating for the teacher, but it is a normal part of the growth of the kingdom.

Thorns

This situation is the most common of all in our time today. We live in a society which is ultimately materialistic; we compete with each other on the number and size of the toys we buy. It's not

new; Jesus was talking about here 2000 years ago. What is new is that our senses are bombarded with the advertising of the materialist lifestyle in a way never before possible. For most Americans, you are what you buy.

Notice please that the "seed", the gospel message, is the same for all three of these folks. What's different is how they nurture the seed. Those on the path do not nurture it at all, those in the rocks let it grow however it wants to, but those amidst the thorns treated as just one more good thing. The sovereign thing in their life is the desire to possess; possessing Christianity means that you take a part of the faith, not the whole. It would be a good thing if it didn't interfere with the weekly trip to the lake with the boat.

Some of us grow very well in the midst of the thorns. We need to be reminded that thorns can be twisted to make a crown.

Weeds

Matthew 13:24-30 NASB Jesus presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. (25) "But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went away. (26) "But when the wheat sprouted and bore grain, then the tares became evident also. (27) "The slaves of the landowner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' (28) "And he said to them, 'An enemy has done this!' The slaves *said to him, 'Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?' (29) "But he *said, 'No; for while you are gathering up the tares, you may uproot the wheat with them. (30) 'Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn.'""

Matthew 13:36-43 NASB Then He left the crowds and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field." (37) And He said, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, (38) and the field is the world; and *as for* the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil *one*; (39) and the enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are angels. (40) "So just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. (41) "The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, (42) and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (43) "Then **THE RIGHTEOUS WILL SHINE FORTH AS THE SUN** in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

Grow Together

It may have occurred to you to note that not all of the people who attend church really act like Christians. In fact, you may suspect some of them of being hypocrites. And it's just barely possible that some of those hypocrites are doing well by the world's standards. In fact you might know someone who causes you to ask God, "Why do the hypocrites prosper in our church?" Think of it this way: where else would they prosper? You never see a counterfeit of the \$25 bill.

In truth, this is an example of God's love for all of humanity. For the hypocrite will prosper in the church, but there is also no more likely way for him to come to repentance. God gives all a space to repent.

Of course, you might be thinking that it's very difficult to determine just who the hypocrites are. This is true; and therefore you might consider not worrying about it. After all, it is rather judgmental to call someone a hypocrite. Remember that our Lord will separate it out at the end of the age, and leave judgment to him.

While His Men Were Sleeping

Of course, it would be very convenient if we could prevent such people from joining the church in the first place. In fact, we do precious little in this regard. Our ancestors will someday point to us and say that we failed to do that which we could. For example:

- ✦ No church discipline. It is extremely rare to see church discipline reach a public stage. We'd like to think this because it's unnecessary, but I think we all know better than that. The reason we don't see church discipline is that there is none. We have a driving wish not to offend anyone, and therefore we do not help them.
- ✦ Preaching. Our ancestors would've prided themselves on the fact that they were unafraid to preach on any subject. As a simple matter of fact, this was expected. The preacher was judged on his willingness to take on controversial topics. We now go backwards to avoid giving offense; I wonder how this sits with the stone of stumbling and the rock of offense.
- ✦ The dull, sleepy church. It's interesting that in church music we have gone to the loud, the up tempo commercial sound. It's just a speculation, but perhaps the reason this is so popular today is that the rest of the church service is rather dull. It is a sign that the church is becoming like the world.

An interesting result was obtained by the Southern Baptists in surveying people who do not go to church. When asked what a church should look like, they replied that it should have stained glass windows, and an organ. A church, you see, should look like a church. The sinners seem to have higher expectations of us than do the saints.

At the End of the Age

The time of reckoning will come. There is no other way to put it; at the return of our Lord will come the judgment. Notice the two types of people that he will pick out of the church as being weeds:

- ✦ First, there are those who are lawless. These are the hypocrites who proclaim themselves pious on Sunday and sophisticated Saturday night.
- ✦ Next, there are those who are the stumbling blocks. There's an interesting point for discussion; just who are these people?

It does matter, you know. It matters every bit as much as heaven and hell.

So there it is: the kingdom of God. It starts is a little thing, grows slowly, and becomes a haven. In the process Satan assaults it, keeping out those who can, and polluting as many of the others as he can.

Life in Hell - Luke 12:16-21; Luke 16:19-31

Going to Hell — First-Class

Luke 12:16-21 NASB And He told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man was very productive. (17) "And he began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?' (18) "Then he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. (19) 'And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.'" (20) "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?' (21) "So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

The Problem of Greed

It is a rare sermon today on the subject of greed. In fact, if you label it entrepreneurial thinking, you would think that the church approves of greed. Let's begin with an understanding of what greed really is:

- ✚ First, it is the desire for "more." It is the driving sense that you cannot be content with what you have; there must always be something else.
- ✚ Second, it is usually associated with the desire to have "the most." It is often enough competitive.
- ✚ What ever its root causes, greed has one simple symptom which is easily recognizable: the refusal to be content.

Please notice that nothing of this requires a certain amount of money. You can be rich and content; you can be poor and greedy. That's not the normal behavior, however.

"Reasoning to Himself"

Please note that this man did not fall into this trap blindly. The Scripture tells us that he reasoned with himself; in other words, this behavior was deliberate. With that in mind, we can make some educated guesses as to his thinking process.

- ✚ It's obvious that his first priority is his own pleasure. This is a man who wants to eat, drink and be merry. (By the way, did you know that that phrase comes from the King James Version of the Bible?) This is a man who in our society would seek nothing more than faster horses, older whiskey, younger women and more money.
- ✚ He is also in the habit of hoarding. That tells you a lot; he fears the future. So when the opportunity comes he eagerly grasps at his own wealth as the means to avoid what's coming.
- ✚ In short, he gave no consideration to God.

That last is most important. If you do your reasoning without considering Almighty God, the results usually turn out like this.

Rich toward God

We often think of God as some sort of cosmic blessing machine. If we want to get rich, we had better ask God to give us the money. Have you considered, however, the opposite direction? How is it that one is rich toward God? The concept may seem to make no sense to you; but if you contrasted with this man, I think you can see why you would want to be this way.

- ✚ First, unlike are rich fool, place your faith in God. Live the life of faith; take no thought for tomorrow. Your heavenly father knows what you need.
- ✚ If you live the life of faith, you must also live the life of good works. This is particularly true if you are rich. As James taught us, "faith without works is dead."
- ✚ Finally, be filled with love.

(I am indebted for those three points to John Wesley.) If you live this life, you will not make this rich fool's mistakes.

Life in Hell

Luke 16:19-31 NASB "Now there was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day. (20) "And a poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, (21) and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores. (22) "Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. (23) "In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and *saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom. (24) "And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.' (25) "But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony. (26) 'And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us.' (27) "And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, that you send him to my father's house-- (28) for I have five brothers--in order that he may warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' (29) "But Abraham *said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' (30) "But he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!' (31) "But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.'"

Physical Hell

It is likely enough that the descriptions we have of hell are in some ways symbolic. But it is worth noting that every description of hell we have from the Bible includes the sense of fiery torment. More than that, in the New Testament it is clear that all the references to hell that are descriptive come from the Lord Jesus Christ himself. This makes sense; he's the one who conquered the grave. So what we know about the physical nature of hell?

- ✚ Hell is hot. I'm sorry to have state the obvious to you that way, but I'm right number of people try to justify hell based on the idea that really couldn't be like that.
- ✚ Those who are in hell can see and talk with those who are in heaven. This is fascinating. You can see why people invent their own version of hell. It's one thing to be in torment; it's entirely another to be in torment while watching others at ease. But apparently we would be able to converse back and forth.
- ✚ There is no traffic between heaven and hell. The King James refers to "the great gulf fixed". In this we see the finality of hell.

Psychological Hell

The first and most obvious point of psychology in hell is pain. It is a pain worse than anything we can imagine here on Earth, for here on Earth the pain can be relieved at times. You can take a pill, you can get drunk, and you could just pretend it's not there – even visit your grandchildren. The pain in hell never ever stops. Indeed, that's another psychological problem – there is no relief possible, forever. Think about people who suffer from cancer. It's very painful, and often enough they look forward to dying because at that point the pain will go away.

There is also a sudden concern for others; this man had five brothers. Is it too much to suggest that it is guilt which is driving him to ask Abraham to send Lazarus back? Evidently guilt does not go away at the door to hell.

One other thing that I have often wondered about: how did he recognize Abraham? Do people wear name tags in heaven? Who can say?

Perhaps the greatest psychological torment is this: he now had clearer vision spiritually. That means he knows "what might have been." He has all of eternity to stare at his mistakes in life.

Lessons about God

Take a look again at verse 25. Do you see the phrase, "your good things?" That carries a couple of possible meanings in the original Greek. One such meaning is that these are the things he had earned. They are the result of his hard work, and hard work is a virtue. The failure in that regard is not the man is rich; after all, Abraham was rich too. Despite what some think, riches are not necessarily an indication of God's grace upon you. Nor, for that matter, is poverty. It is just barely possible that the test is not how big or small your wallet is, but what you do with the contents.

This shows us the justice of God. The man deserves to be in hell; he made the decisions he did without contemplating what God would do.

If you had to draw up an indictment, the charge would be "failure to love." It is a sin, even if you pretend that the other person is not there. Let me give you an example. For some years I commuted regularly to the San Francisco Bay Area. I relied on public transportation (trains and subways) to get to work. As I came out of the subway station, each day I would see a particular beggar. His plight touched me, for he had served in Vietnam and been blinded there. I went back and forth with God on this; after all, I thought, I can't cure world hunger. God's response is relatively simple; he never asked me to cure world hunger — he asked me to feed one beggar. So I did.

The rich man in this story might well tell you that he could not cure world hunger. God did not ask him to; he just dropped one beggar at his doorstep.

American Thought

May I bring to you three examples? I see these people in my church; I met them where I worked. They are not isolated examples, but they are an indictment of our society.

Self-Made Man

This is a man who can tell you that he earned every dime he has. Have you ever noticed how defensive they are about it? It's almost as if there's something wrong with the way they handled the money. Indeed, there is — if they have wealth with arrogance. An interesting study of this can be made by looking at the license plate frames on Mercedes cars. The indictment is not how they earned the money; it's what they did with it when they got it. Or perhaps, more correctly, what they didn't do with it.

It is wise in this instance for those of us who do not have that kind of money to refrain from judgment. We must call our Lord instructed those who have money to give but to do so that the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing. Booker T. Washington put it this way:

My experience in getting money for Tuskegee has taught me to have no patience with those people who are always condemning the rich because they are rich, and because they do not give more to objects of charity. In the first place, those who are guilty of such sweeping criticisms do not know how many people would be made poor, and how much suffering would result, if wealthy people were to part all at once with any large proportion of their wealth in a way to disorganize and cripple great business enterprise. Then very few persons have any idea of the large number of applications for help that rich people are constantly being flooded with. I know wealthy people who receive as many as twenty calls a day for help. More than once, when I have gone into the offices of rich men, I have found half a dozen persons waiting to see them, and all come for the same purpose, that of securing money. And all these calls in person, to say nothing of the applications received through the mails. Very few people have any idea of the amount of money given away by persons who never permit their names to be known. I have often heard persons condemned for not giving away money, who, to my own knowledge, were giving away thousands of dollars every year so quietly that the world knew nothing about it.

The Competitor

It is not clear from the passage, but it would be clear to the first century reader that this man paid a great deal of attention to his appearance. That's what this "dressed in purple" was all about. Today such a man would be wearing an Armani suit with just exactly the right tie. The key to understanding such a personality is in the comparison, the prideful nature of such a man. Such a man has to show you that he is better than you are; it is a matter of pride.

But there is another aspect to it. Sometimes your experience is such that you become addicted to winning. This implies two things:

- ✚ The first one is that you never engage in anything if you don't think you can win. That rather restricts your activities, doesn't it?
- ✚ The second one is that all victories are personal triumphs. You have to beat someone.

The Money Man

In my college days I encountered the student who would eventually go to Harvard Medical School. He rather gleefully told me about his interview with Harvard Medical. The high point of the interview, to him, was when they asked him why he wanted to become a doctor. "To get rich," he

replied. Let me ask you something: would you rather have your surgeon the one who's in it for the money, or one who really would like to heal people?

For many men, work is their definition of self. Perhaps that should not be; but for many men it is true. If it's true for you, then consider: if you're doing the job with no significance other than the paycheck, doesn't that make you a prostitute?

Permit me a medical counterexample. The family doctor that I and my family went to for many years announced one day that he was leaving the medical organization which had provided his income. He had saved up enough money to be independently wealthy. He chose to move to the slums of Philadelphia, where his church had an active ministry, including a medical clinic. He is now in the business of healing, not the business of making money.

The difference is his attitude towards the work. He became a doctor to heal people; the student became a doctor to get rich. Which doctor would you rather have? Which doctor would you rather be? It's just possible that the difference in attitude is also the difference between heaven and hell.

Forgiveness - Luke 7:36-50

Luke 7:36-50 NASB Now one of the Pharisees was requesting Him to dine with him, and He entered the Pharisee's house and reclined *at the table*. (37) And there was a woman in the city who was a sinner; and when she learned that He was reclining *at the table* in the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster vial of perfume, (38) and standing behind *Him* at His feet, weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears, and kept wiping them with the hair of her head, and kissing His feet and anointing them with the perfume. (39) Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner." (40) And Jesus answered him, "**Simon, I have something to say to you.**" And he replied, "Say it, Teacher." (41) "**A moneylender had two debtors: one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty.** (42) "**When they were unable to repay, he graciously forgave them both. So which of them will love him more?**" (43) Simon answered and said, "I suppose the one whom he forgave more." And He said to him, "**You have judged correctly.**" (44) Turning toward the woman, He said to Simon, "**Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has wet My feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair.** (45) "**You gave Me no kiss; but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet.** (46) "**You did not anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with perfume.** (47) "**For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little.**" (48) Then He said to her, "**Your sins have been forgiven.**" (49) Those who were reclining *at the table* with Him began to say to themselves, "Who is this *man* who even forgives sins?" (50) And He said to the woman, "**Your faith has saved you; go in peace.**"

About "That Woman"

One of the great peculiarities of Jesus Christ is that his person attracted the sinners. Those who are righteous in their own mind viewed him with suspicion; those who knew darn good and well that they were sinners of the worst type loved him. Tax collectors, political frauds and women who were prostitutes came to him for forgiveness and salvation. In this lesson we examine one of those women.

Prostitution-a Victimless Crime

The modern attitude towards prostitution is shaped by Hollywood. Prostitutes on the silver screen are women with hearts of gold, dazzling beauty and tough circumstances. Given our modern attitude towards sex, we often see prostitution as being a victimless crime. Indeed, in Nevada (except Las Vegas) prostitution is legal. When the subject comes up good liberal thinkers don't hesitate to tell us that we are wasting our money on pursuing prostitution. But I submit to you that prostitution is not a victimless crime; to do so we must name the victims.

- ✚ The first victim is the prostitute herself. The prostitute's life is often driven by a pimp who is also supplying her drugs. It is not unusual that she has small children which even more ties are to the man who gives her the drugs. Her life is not that of a movie prostitute; it is not at all that glamorous. She's at the bottom of the food chain, and she knows it.
- ✚ The next victim is the wife of the man who uses the prostitute. Think of the message this sends to her. It tells you how completely unworthy he thinks she is. Worse, the movie image of the prostitute is now what she sees as her chief competition. The movie image is a formidable competitor to the married wife.

- ✚ We are not out of victims yet. Consider the effect that prostitution has on the man's children. They grow up thinking that this sort of treatment for their mother is perfectly normal. The boys grow up to be men who see nothing wrong with the prostitute and the girls grow up expecting to get married and put up with it.
- ✚ Oh yeah, forgot to mention sexually transmitted diseases.

Why Prostitution?

A woman of Christ time would not have the drawback of being a drug addict. So we might well ask just how a woman could fall into being a prostitute in the time of Christ. One of the most common ways would've been through being a widow. Particularly if she is a widow with young children, meaning there is no grown male child to provide for her, her options were extremely limited. She could appeal to her husband's family, but often enough they weren't interested.

You might think that this is easily overcome. Remember that in this day there were no women's professions, other than prostitution. Women stayed in the home. But let me give you a modern example of the kind of pressure that can be applied. Many years ago I was sent to Cleveland to take a course on a new software product that was being marketed for the first time. It was very unusual, but we were told to be there at one o'clock in the afternoon of Sunday. Since the product was made by my company, there seemed no reason to deny this – and I duly showed up. It was a social occasion – only. At this occasion a very attractive redhead attached herself to me and proceeded to flatter me all afternoon. There may be a male on the planet that doesn't like the flattery of a pretty girl. I'm not that male. She wasn't in the class, but we had dinner together every night as a class – and she was there. On Thursday night she was kind enough to drop me off at the hotel. She then asked if I would like to have her come up to my room. It was an awkward moment, and I tried to do my best to firmly but politely decline.

She broke out in tears. When I did finally get some sense out of her, she explained why she was so "attracted" to me. She was a single mother with two small children. Her job was that of data entry on the keypunch machine. Her management had told her that she was to seduce me to provide them leverage to make me recommend the product. She was told she would be fired if she did not cooperate. (If this happened today my reaction would be very different.) In those days, there seemed to be no avenue to setting things right. The product was a "no sale." Eventually the manager in question was fired, though I am not sure that my actions (and my outrage) had anything to do with it.

You see the point, I hope. Even in these modern times a single woman with small children can often be in a desperate circumstance. It's one of the reasons God hates divorce.

Our prostitute here might have had another excuse; she might simply have been the prodigal daughter. I'm sure that in our own mind she justified herself however she could. But we must ask: does the fact that she has a reasonable and indeed heart wrenching excuse really make her actions the less sinful? To ask the question is to answer it. No matter how she excused herself, she knew that what she was doing was wrong. But as so often happens, she saw no escape. No escape, until Jesus arrived.

Act of Devotion

Her plea for forgiveness matched her desperation. She was not about to bring the subject up lightly in casual conversation. In her circumstances she was not about to try anything halfway. What she did is an act of devotion, something that Christians no longer consider – but should.

- ✚ First and foremost, it was an extravagant act. Remember the widow with her two mites? She could've given only one; but she gave all she had. That's extravagance. Breaking that perfume jar over Jesus' feet was also extravagant.
- ✚ It has the characteristic of an act of devotion — namely that the world thought it was useless.
- ✚ Finally, the act was delivered in such a way that you knew the utter humility of the woman. It wasn't about her; it was about Jesus Christ.

If you can see the completeness of this woman's sacrifice, then you understand both the cost and the joy involved.

The Simple Parable

Normally we would put the principles at the back of the lesson, so that you might walk away with them. I put them here so that you understand them first and then we can talk about how to act on them.

Forgiven More, Love More

My wife and I frequently (well, twice a year) participate in prison ministry. One of the interesting lessons we learn is that people like us, who have shared God's bounty with relatively little trouble, are at a disadvantage in talking to the inmates. The speakers they use are often ex-convicts. Their words carry more weight, because they have been there. They have also been forgiven much more than I have had to. That testimony is powerful; the ordinary civilian might not be able to get that point across.

Great sinners make great Saints. The prime example of this, of course, is St. Paul. He frequently describes himself as one who had persecuted the church and was therefore the least worthy of sinners. Then he drew the contrast and showed what God had made of him. The example is still pertinent today.

Forgiveness Is Expensive

Sometimes forgiveness is expensive to the forgiver. Let me give you an example:

Dan Sickles was, in the 1850s, an up and coming politician, a Congressman from New York. He was a member of one of the most prominent of political organizations (and the most corrupt): Tammany Hall. He had his sights set upon becoming president of the United States. He might have made it -- had he not shot and killed Philip Barton Key.

Key was the son of Francis Scott Key, the man who wrote "The Star Spangled Banner," our national anthem. He was a good friend of Sickles. He was also Sickles' lawyer, and Sickles appears to have used his influence to have Key appointed as United States attorney. He also was Mrs. Sickles' lover.

One day, on the street across from the White House, Sickles met Key. He pulled out his revolver and shot him dead on the spot. That accomplished, he walked down the street to surrender the revolver (and himself) to the Attorney General.

The trial was a public circus. People debated whether or not Sickles was a man who had defended the sanctity of marriage or a common murderer. Remember, this was in a time when almost everyone in

America believed that divorce was morally wrong. Adultery was not "an affair," but one of the worst sins anyone could commit. Meanwhile, his defense team (including Edwin Stanton, later the Secretary of War for Abraham Lincoln) came up with a new defense. For the first time in American justice, they raised the defense of "temporary insanity." They argued that the shock of finding out that his wife was untrue to him, and with his best friend, was so great as to render him insane. The court acquitted him. He returned to Congress to find himself an absolute pariah. When he entered the hall, other members refused even to sit near him. He was totally ostracized -- but not for murder. You see, he had done something so utterly scandalous as to make the shooting seem trivial by comparison. He forgave his wife, and took her back.

You might not think of it this way, but social expectations often make forgiveness very expensive. If it is expensive for the one who forgives, it can also be expensive for the one who is forgiven. Mrs. Sickles spent the rest of her life as a social pariah. Often enough people do not wish to be forgiven, because forgiving implies they were wrong – and that's going to hurt their pride. God forgives us at the price of the Cross.

God's Forgiveness Depends on Your Forgiveness

With all the expense and trouble involved, some of us would think it's just not worth it. After all, what difference does it make if I forgive her? It's that kind of thinking because God teaches otherwise. He makes it explicit in this passage:

Matthew 6:14-15 NASB "For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. (15) "But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.

The red letters tell you who was speaking. So there you have it: it is a command. But Americans want to know why such a command would be given; rather curious about these things, aren't we? Here's a reason:

Romans 12:19 NASB Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," says the Lord.

Vengeance belongs to God; if you take it, you are stealing from God. Vengeance is his job; yours is forgiveness. It is best to keep her mind on your work. All of this, of course, is nothing but the imitation of Christ — who forgave us at the Cross. He puts it to us this way:

Matthew 5:43-48 NASB "You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.' (44) "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, (45) so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (46) "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? (47) "If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? (48) "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Barriers to Forgiveness

For the modern Christian it is important to find the barriers to forgiveness, so that we can deal with them.

Acceptable Sins

We saw with Dan Sickles above social convention might be a deterrent to forgiveness. The fact is that every age has its list of acceptable sins. In our time divorce is not considered a sin, and adultery barely makes the list — sometimes. Greed is entrepreneurial; envy is social justice. The trick for the Christian is to recognize these facts and look past the social convention to see the real sin — and the real sinner. In our time we have difficulty with establishing what is or is not a sin, or even whether or not such a thing as sin exists. Do not be deceived; just because society doesn't think forgiveness is necessary, that doesn't mean it is no longer required.

It's the Principle

In my misspent youth I used to run what were called gimmick rallies. This was a car trip combined with the test of your mental skills in solving the puzzles presented to you. The first time I participated, I get an argument with the rally master. When I was advised that we had won the rally, and that what I was arguing over was worth precisely 1/8 of the point, I replied "it's the principle of the thing." What that means is, of course, my pride was involved. The overweening desire to prove that you are right is probably the greatest barrier to forgiveness. We even laugh about it; have you ever seen the cartoon where the tombstone said, "I had the right-of-way"? We often find ourselves in pride; we are therefore not capable of forgiveness.

Bury the Hatchet — Handle up

Sometimes we go through the formal act of forgiveness, but our other actions reveal that we really haven't forgiven. We may have been pressured into it. Do not be mistaken; God one honest forgiveness, not the ceremony. One of the places this is most common for us is in someone's annoying habits. They may not even see the habit is something offensive, but it grates on you. You then find that you must forgive more than once, even to the point of having to put up with it.

Here's a test for you: do you ever lie awake at night dreaming of your own vengeance? Do you savor every little morsel of revenge as you humiliate your opponent? That is not forgiveness; it is (as Bismarck would've remarked) the rage of dreaming sheep. You have a choice: chew the cud of anger or forgive. Often enough, your decision either way doesn't affect the person who wronged you. The matter is entirely in your mind, they might not even know they offended you. This is still taking vengeance; and you're doing it when you should forgive. As you leave this lesson, consider: Christ forgives you because you forgive others. The question is, are there any others to forgive?

The Good Samaritan - Luke 10:25-37

The Story

Let's begin by letting Luke tell the story.

Luke 10:25-37 NASB And a lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" (26) And He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?" (27) And he answered, "YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND; AND YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF." (28) And He said to him, "You have answered correctly; DO THIS AND YOU WILL LIVE." (29) But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (30) Jesus replied and said, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went away leaving him half dead. (31) "And by chance a priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. (32) "Likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. (33) "But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, (34) and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him. (35) "On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.' (36) "Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?" (37) And he said, "The one who showed mercy toward him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same."

This might be the best known of Christ's parables. It is at once famous and obscure, for some of the details might have been overlooked.

The Players

The traveler

The traveler was alone on the Jericho road – an act of folly even into the 20th century. It was much safer to travel in a group. To put it bluntly, our traveler is rather dumb. Worse, he was likely to be ignored because bandits would often waylay the lone traveler and then leave him on the ground, hoping to entice some other traveler into the same trap.

The Samaritan

The hearers of this story would most certainly have been shocked at the person who stopped to help. Samaritans and Jews hated each other. But give that a thought; this Samaritan stopped to help a man whom he knew despised him. Indeed, the Samaritan did so despite the fact that he was on a journey, not just a trip to Jericho. We may observe also:

- ✚ He came prepared – he had his own first aid kit. How often have Christians said, "I wasn't prepared – I had nothing to give?"

- ✚ He followed through, leaving nothing undone. He was not afraid to enlist the innkeeper's services at his own expense. He finished what he started. He got involved and stayed involved to the end of the matter.

- ✚ His credit was good!

The priest

Older and more literal translations tell us that the priest's arrival was "by chance" or "by coincidence." It was "just one of those things." We see strange sights along the roads of life, and often enough we look, cluck sorrowfully and move on. After all, it was pure coincidence that we were there, right? Or is coincidence actually the providence of God?

One thing we do know. If the traveler dies in the priest's care, the priest is ceremonially unclean for seven days. This means he could not perform his duties as a priest. You can hear him thinking, "Prior commitments, can't take the risk." Do we make our appointments subject to, "If the Lord wills it?"[1]

The Levite

We might examine two points here:

- ✚ "Passed him by on the other side" – took no risks. Did he congratulate himself on how astute that was?

- ✚ "Saw him" – the phrase literally means "stared at him." [2] The traveler was nothing more than a traffic accident; the Levite a rubbernecker.

Similar Today?

We might do well to examine ourselves today, looking for situations which are similar to this one. Consider, for example, the guy standing by the roadside with a sign reading "please help." We are wary of such people. Sometimes, we feel bothered by them. Somewhere, deep in our conscience, we know that we should help them. But it's risky.

There are some practical ways you can be prepared to help such a person. For example:

- ✚ Gift cards to local fast food restaurants. If someone has a sign asking for food, one of these places is an excellent source of calories at a low price. Often enough, as in our church, you can get these gift cards and also benefit your church's work at the same time.

- ✚ If you meet the same person day in and out, perhaps this is God giving you a message. Perhaps you are to help this one person.

- ✚ A dollar bill in a convenient location never hurts.

Compassion Is

Risky

Compassion is difficult for us because it is risky.

- ✦ It is risky in the physical sense. The bandits of this time would often beat a man like this – and wait for someone else to stop to help him, thus obtaining another victim. There is the risk of physical danger in compassion; the guy standing by the road with a cardboard sign just might be violent. You never know, do you?
- ✦ It is risky in the sense of emotional distance. The Jews and the Samaritans hated each other. It's one thing to be compassionate to a friend. It's another to be compassionate to someone who is outside our comfort zone. It "feels funny" to be in contact with someone who doesn't speak your language for instance – especially when that person needs help desperately.
- ✦ It is risky because it implies entanglement – you may get tangled up in someone's life. That life may be very different from yours; you may not approve of that life. "Don't get involved" is advice that comes from experience. Getting involved entangles your life with theirs, and that is usually rather messy. You don't know how long it will last or what it will cost. Not knowing is a barrier to compassion. It's a lot easier to make a definite, one time donation than it is to be compassionate in person.

Expensive

When we use the word "expensive," we usually mean that the cost is (to us) rather high. That's the case in compassion as well:

- ✦ Note that the Samaritan puts the man on his own beast, probably a donkey. He gives up his own transportation and walks while this poor fellow rides. Compassion may mean that we do without.
- ✦ Compassion almost always has its cash cost. In this instance, two days wages, perhaps something like \$400 in our day. It's not that we can't afford it at all; it's that it's big enough to be labeled expensive. That's typical of anything worth doing.
- ✦ It may also have its cost in credit! This man told the innkeeper that he would repay him any additional cost. In our time, that's like handing him a credit card. Often enough in compassion we have to say, "I'll handle that." (It's interesting to note that the innkeeper, probably Jewish, knew that the Samaritan's credit was good.)

Heavy impact – on others

It's generally the case that we cannot complete an act of compassion by ourselves; we need the help of others.

- ✦ In this the innkeeper is involved. He might well ask the Samaritan whether or not this was an inn or a hospital. I suspect that he knew the Samaritan to be a regular customer; we put up with a lot for regular customers. We socially obligate others in our compassion; a real inconvenience.
- ✦ More commonly, we obligate family and friends. If you don't think so, what happens when your daughter brings home a stray cat? (Or a stray person, for that matter).
- ✦ One impact you may not have considered is the impact on your reputation. To show compassion in a socially acceptable way (for example, giving to an orphanage like the one we support) usually enhances your reputation. But if you do it in a strange way (there are dozens of examples, but let's suppose you bail out a friend arrested for soliciting a prostitute) you can definitely acquire a reputation for doing strange things.

Types of Compassion

In our church today there are more options for dealing with this kind of trouble than the Samaritan had. Let's look at three.

Parachurch

Organizations such as the Fullerton Interfaith Emergency Services — the people who collect boxes of food from us about this time of year — are much more commonplace today. Since such organizations typically deal with this problem on our behalf, the risk of getting involved is much, much lower. Indeed, the financial aspect is also reduced. The difficulty of course is that you may decide that you are charitable and compassionate — but only with a cardboard box. If you get involved with such an organization you will have to face those in need. It's a lot easier to do it as a group than it was for our Samaritan. An example of do-it-yourself compassion might be prison ministry. This too is a low risk example of compassion, but it doesn't necessarily feel like that when the jail bars clank behind you.

Church Corporate

Since the beginning of the church Christians have been giving on behalf of their congregation. The risk in doing this is very low; in fact, the chief danger is that you will be praised from the pulpit so much that your right hand and your left hand will become closely acquainted. There is a distinct danger in thinking you are compassionate when in fact you are just easily led.

Expense, on the other hand, is a bit different. At least our church, corporate compassion includes trips to places like Kenya. It is not cheap to go to Kenya and it is very time-consuming. The expense seems to range from minor to "vacation of a lifetime."

That said, we should point out the impact this activity has on other people. If you go to Kenya, you will bless some of those people in Kenya. You are also setting an example to others in the church — an appeal to get out of their comfort zone — and it does good things for the church's reputation too.

This Individual

The risk in individual compassion depends very much on the circumstances, and also on whether or not you know the circumstances. That guy by the roadside could be extremely dangerous; that's the chance you take when you roll your window down. The expense and the situation is, however, rather small.

The expense might grow greatly, however, if it's compassion for a person you know. If you take in a homeless person, for example, it's usually someone you know. What you don't know is how long this is going to take and what it's going to cost. The expense can be social, as well. The best indicator of this is whether or not anyone else would be willing to help. Some are homeless through no real fault of their own; some got themselves into that mess. There are socially acceptable sins; there are socially unacceptable sins. What you see as compassion others might see as idiocy.

So what is a Christian to do? Follow the leading of the Holy Spirit, and don't worry what everyone else says.

Imitation of Christ

The behavior of the Christian has been defined for 2000 years in one question: what would Jesus do?

Sense of Purpose

To begin with, do not think of compassion as "random acts of kindness." You must have a sense of purpose in your compassion; you must be prepared. (I know that's not what is preached from the pulpit today.) Be prepared to be compassionate. Do it like Jesus would.

- ✦ Jesus was not one to respect a person's position in life. He treated them all with the love he had for sinners. The homeless and bank presidents too – Jesus loves them all. Do likewise.
- ✦ When reading through the Scriptures, remember that the adjective "merciful" is more commonly used than our word "compassionate." Compassion is an emotion; mercy is a fact. Be prepared to be merciful. Think about it in advance.
- ✦ Remember also that your acts of compassion are way of spreading the faith. When someone asks you, "Why do you do this" be prepared with a ready answer.

Style

Christian compassion is performed with a certain style:¹

- ✦ Christian compassion is done in kindness. It is done with joy mixed in with the mercy. Remember, your compassion may be embarrassing somebody. It's tough for people who have been self-sufficient for years to take someone else's charity. Make it clear that you have the joy of giving.
- ✦ Christian compassion is done in humility. You are not condescending to someone to bless them; rather, you are the servant of God Most High, and at his command (not by your pride) you obediently provide.
- ✦ Christian compassion is done with patience. Often enough, the person upon whom you are having compassion has done something wrong, or can't see why they're always being rejected. Sometimes, they don't get it. And if that is the case, they usually don't get why they don't get it. Be patient, as your Heavenly Father is patient with you.

Being a Cheerful Giver

You have often been exhorted to be a cheerful giver. This applies not only in the offering plate but in your personal compassion. There are two things of which you must beware:

- ✦ First, you must beware of cynicism. It's easy to be compassionate at the start and then give way to cynicism. But it is not possible to be a cynic and cheerful about it.
- ✦ Next, you must also beware of anger. People tend to repeat their stupid mistakes. Even when you tell them not to. Put the anger aside, and be a cheerful giver. They usually know when they repeated their own stupid mistake.

In short, be a reflection of Christ. Why? Because those upon whom you have compassion are also a reflection of Christ.²

¹ See Colossians 3:12-13

² Matthew 25:31-46

The Nature of Christ - Various Scriptures

Lost

If we are to imitate our Lord we must know his ways. Today we will look at the nature of Christ as revealed in some of the most famous of parables.

Luke 15:1-10 TNIV Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. (2) But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." (3) Then Jesus told them this parable: (4) "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? (5) And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders (6) and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' (7) I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. (8) "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? (9) And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' (10) In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Grumbling

Some people are not content unless they have something to grumble about. The Pharisees are no exception; they have little difficulty in finding fault with Jesus. In particular, the man associates with known sinners. Understand please, there distinction of sinner and righteous is somewhat different from ours. The sinner is someone who leads a life of overt disobedience to what the Pharisees consider as the law. The most common example quoted in Scripture is that of prostitutes, followed closely by tax collectors. I leave to the reader the implications of that order.

The truth is that most of us categorize sin into the disreputable and acceptable. The category seems to be based on how prevalent the sin is. Prostitutes are not the normal woman you meet; therefore, they are sinners. Those who stuff themselves (gluttons) are viewed with an air that it could happen to anybody. This might be an innocent occupation if it were not for the fact that it can be used to categorize those in the church — and in particular deny entrance to those who have the wrong kinds of sins. I once was denied entry into a church because I pointed out the obvious hypocrisy in their selecting people. They claimed it was to "preserve the character of our witness." It seemed to the rest of us that it was designed to keep out people with the wrong skin color. It is a rare church that is totally free of this kind of selection.

Who Does He Seek?

In these two parables Jesus identifies the kind of people that he came to look for:

- ✚ Sheep. It's my understanding that sheep are rather stupid. If left to their own devices they will wander off and get lost on their own. This explains the employment of sheepdogs. But notice that there is no condemnation of the sheep; they're stupid and everyone knows it. So it is with human beings; some of us just need being rounded up.
- ✚ The coin, on the other hand, is lost through no fault of its own. But it's still lost. It's not possible to round them up, they have to be searched for.

Thus it is that we are to seek those who are lost and round up those who have wandered away, for our Lord loves and seeks them.

We Should Seek Them

Christ's command is clear; we should seek them.

- ✚ We are to search no matter where. There is no place so dark that the Light of the World cannot penetrate it.
- ✚ We are to search no matter when. Today is the day and now is the hour of salvation.
- ✚ We are to search no matter how. The woman lit a lamp and used a broom. If it takes car shows and rock-and-roll to bring them in, then so be it.

The Good Shepherd

Christ amplifies his meaning by telling us just what a shepherd should be doing.

John 10:1-17 TNIV "Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. (2) The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. (3) The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. (4) When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. (5) But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice." (6) Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them. (7) Therefore Jesus said again, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. (8) All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. (9) I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. (10) The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. (11) "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. (12) The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. (13) The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. (14) "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— (15) just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. (16) I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. (17) The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again.

(The reader will note that we do not intend to cover all the meanings encompassed by this speech. Rather, we will examine the character of the good Shepherd — and his competitors.)

Christ and the Father

Jesus touches briefly here on a subject which is mystified Christians for 2000 years: the Trinity. We can but briefly touch upon the best known solution, from Thomas Aquinas. He distinguishes three characteristics of any person: essence, attributes and accidents. To give you an example, God's essence is his existence. He is the "I am." He has attributes, indeed he is his attributes. So we may say that God is love, God is truth, God is righteousness, etc. Jesus Christ had a shoe size. Philosophically speaking, that's an accident. All three persons of the Godhead share in the essence of God. They also include all the attributes of God – but only Jesus had accidents. Only Jesus was incarnate.

There is an interesting dichotomy here between Christianity and Islam. The Christian maintains that God is; and that God is love. If this is so, I trust you can see that God must be plural in persons. You cannot have love unless there is an object of your love. Indeed, I submit that the Trinity is necessary because you not only have to have an object to love, but you also have to have the choice not to love. So there must be at least three persons in the Godhead. In Islam, God's existence is not his essence – rather, God is pure will. (This, by the way, denies the possibility of causality. That explains a lot about Islamic civilization.)

There is one key here for all of us: God the father gives the sheep (that's us) to the Son. He, in turn, entrusts them to the church. That trust we must examine next.

Shepherds

As far as we know, there has never been a time in the history of the church where all of its pastors are pure man, solely devoted to the kingdom. Read the letters in the New Testament. You will see that rather frequently we have men who are not working in the best interests of Christ. Jesus breaks it down this way:

- ✚ There is first the thief. We do not need to look very far from these people. These are the ones who are taking upon themselves the role of the pastor, but they're in it for the money. I would not care to name names, but it would strike me that looking at televangelists might produce a fair crop of these.
- ✚ Next there is the hired hand. It's a job; he gets a lot of respect but perhaps not as much money as one would like. In this day and age such people are rather more rare than usual. But if you look at the history of the church, particularly in the Middle Ages, you'll find plenty of examples. The test point is this: what happens when the going gets rough?
- ✚ Finally there is the true pastor. I strongly suspect that the vast majority of pastors today fall into this category. They may be dumb, ignorant or misled — but is it not the case that most of the pastors you know are in fact dedicated to Jesus Christ?

The Sheep

All well and good, but what are we supposed to do about it? How do we separate the hired hand in the thief from the true pastor?

- ✚ Remember that Christ calls his sheep by name. This implies a personal relationship. The final appeal, as Churchill put it, is to heaven, not to Rome. When you have a close personal relationship with Jesus, determining the truth in a man's heart is quite a bit easier. You know what to look for.
- ✚ Therefore, you listen to his voice. Study the Scriptures; pray and listen.
- ✚ Finally, understand that you are sheep. No, you aren't smart enough to figure everything out. You're going to have to trust God, just as the sheep trust the shepherd.

Prodigal Son

Luke 15:11-32 TNIV Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. (12) The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. (13) "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. (14) After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. (15) So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.

(16) He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. (17) "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! (18) I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. (19) I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.'" (20) So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. (21) "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'" (22) "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. (23) Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. (24) For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'" So they began to celebrate. (25) "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. (26) So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. (27) "Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'" (28) "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. (29) But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. (30) But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' (31) "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. (32) But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

This story has been labeled the greatest short story ever written – the quote is variously attributed to Mark Twain, Charles Dickens and others. I am unable to track down the original citation.

The Prodigal

We live in the country in which rebellion against authority is praised. As I write this, the "occupy Wall Street" movement is just winding down. The occupiers have been fawned over by the press to the point of heroic. It is as if we have forgotten the basic lesson of sin: sin starts with rebellion. Rebellion is the root of sin; it tells God that you know better than he does. That's what happens with her younger brother in this story. It is a measure of the love of God, as portrayed by the father, that such a thing is allowed at all. How much nicer it would be if God prohibited all such rebellion! But in his great love for us he has given us the freedom to choose. So the young man does it his way and squanders the money.

Please notice one thing: it is by reason that the young man comes to his senses. Reason triumphs over rebellion. I have often heard this parable interpreted with the younger man's decision being made an emotional moment. Read the passage again; the kid comes to his senses and reasons out what he should have done. The result of this reasoning?

- ✚ Humility comes first. The conquest of pride by humility is necessary before the boy can go home.
- ✚ Honesty is next. The kid has figured it out that he is alone his fortune and forfeited all right to go back to the home. He sees his status with his father completely changed into that of the lowest servant. He's right; that's what he deserves.

The Father

In the father in this parable we see the example of God. May I point out three brief points?

- ✦ The father was looking for the son to return home. You can imagine scanning the horizon every day, waiting heart broken. He will not go and attempt to force him to come home, but he will stand at the gate and watch.
- ✦ Once you understand that the father in this parable represents God you will see something startling: God runs. He is portrayed as being in flight on the cherubim, seated in majesty, even walking with his children. But this is the only place where God is shown running. How much God loves us!
- ✦ The boy has come home with his canned speech; he knows the facts. Perhaps he does not know the father. For his father throws a party to celebrate the fact that he is home. When a sinner comes home, God and all the angels rejoice.

The Older Brother

If the younger brother emphasizes rebellion, the older brother represents the doctrine of salvation by works. He is offended by the generosity of his father.

- ✦ The older brother sees his younger brother's return as a time for justice. Dad should give you what for and teach him a lesson. It is well said that mercy triumphs over justice; that's exactly what's happening here.
- ✦ Indeed, the father's generosity, as seen in the older brother's eyes, is foolishness. Sometimes difficult for us to distinguish foolishness from love. But the foolishness of God is greater than the wisdom of me.
- ✦ One point that perhaps you didn't notice: the father went out to the older brother, too. God reaches out to the warm, passionate sinner; he also reaches out to the cold, legalistic sinner.

The Vine

All well and good; but what am I supposed to do about it? How am I supposed to portray myself as being like Christ? If you think about it, it's rather difficult to deal with the prodigal son. It's no easy thing to search for the sinner was lost. In short, I get the point of the parables — but I don't see how I can possibly put them into action.

You're absolutely right. You can't. But there is a way...

John 15:1-8 TNIV "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. (2) He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. (3) You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. (4) Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. (5) "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. (6) If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. (7) If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. (8) This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

Imitation of Christ

Truth to tell, I grumble better than I search. I prefer to complain about the difficulty of the assignment rather than get on with the work. But like all of the good things of life the work must be done. So the first decision we need to make is that were going to do the work. This means, as you can

see from this parable, we are going to have to draw on the strength that Christ provides those who are in relationship with him.

This seems somewhat difficult; sort of like herding cats. Sheep are bad enough. Okay, it's difficult. But it's also required. One reason for this is that this obliges you to remain in Christ, remain a branch on the true vine. My prodigals are a long way off, but that doesn't change the need to be alert to their return.

Christ the True Vine

"Remain in me." By our own strength unaided we are not capable of the kind of loving, forgiving response we see here. We cannot remain diligent long enough, nor can we search hard enough as long as we rely on our own strength. But if you rely upon Christ's strength, things are different. What may surprise you is the way by which you tell you're doing it right. There are two things which will become evident:

- ✚ First, you will be fruitful. People come to Christ, people will grow in Christ, and people will be blessed in Christ by what you do. Not all of us are cut out to be evangelists, but your life in Christ should show to the point where you can say that you have borne much fruit.
- ✚ You will also be pruned. Usually at an inconvenient time – at least it will be for you. As a teacher, I experience this. People open to the class; they learn — and leave. God is giving them the growth they need; the teacher's ego is not considered important in this process. In fact, it helps with his humility when this happens.

How to Remain in Christ

So the question is, "how do I remain in Christ?"

- ✚ May I suggest you begin with study and meditation? Transformation proceeds from the inside out. Study the Scriptures; meditate upon them and learn from him.
- ✚ With your mind properly informed by your studies, go to him in prayer. Prayer is easier when you know what you're talking about.
- ✚ Then, with your mind prepared and your life synchronized to him by prayer, take action as he gives you guidance.

God's work, done God's way, will never lack for God's supply (Hudson Taylor). The arm of flesh will fail you; stand in his strength alone.

Individual Prophecy - Various Scriptures

Servants Waiting

In this lesson we examine three parables which relate prophecy concerning an individual Christian. Parables are often used to discuss prophetic matters; these parables relate to prophecy as it affects each individual Christian. We begin with the servants waiting for their master.

Luke 12:35-40 NASB "Be dressed in readiness, and keep your lamps lit. (36) "Be like men who are waiting for their master when he returns from the wedding feast, so that they may immediately open the door to him when he comes and knocks. (37) "Blessed are those slaves whom the master will find on the alert when he comes; truly I say to you, that he will gird himself to serve, and have them recline at the table, and will come up and wait on them. (38) "Whether he comes in the second watch, or even in the third, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. (39) "But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have allowed his house to be broken into. (40) "You too, be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect."

A Question of Tense

One scholar, commenting on the first sentence of this section of scripture, said that it was in the "periphrastic perfect passive imperative third plural of the verb." This carries some truth to it, when you puzzle it out:

- ✚ Periphrastic – means that this sentence could have been reduced to a single word. What word? "Watch!"
- ✚ Perfect passive – it's written in the passive voice. The content is sufficiently sharp that it shines through that.
- ✚ Imperative – it's a command, not a suggestion.
- ✚ Third plural – it's not addressed to one person, or a group of people individually, but to all of us as a group.

The older translations such as the King James begin this passage with, "let your loins be girded." That's the example of perfect passive; it's not quite as well translated in the newer translations. But these four points remain; most importantly, this is a command addressed to us as Christians in a group — the church.

Be Dressed

A Jewish Christian reading these words would immediately think of the Passover. You will recall that the first Passover was eaten while the Jews were dressed, ready for a voyage. They were prepared to do God's command.

Preparation is something that most of us think of after we failed to do it. Have you ever had that feeling? Many of us have been taught that Christianity is a spontaneous and emotional response to a situation. We have been taught that it is impossible to prepare. May I suggest an alternate model? In the military, the service man is given instructions each day concerning the "uniform of the day." There are several possibilities for this uniform but they are prescribed from above. The Christian too has a "uniform of the day." The Christian should be prepared to give, to render assistance (remember the

Good Samaritan?), to comfort those who be comforting and indeed rejoice with those who are rejoicing. How do we do this?

- ✚ Preparation is a lifestyle. If you carry a first aid kit in your car, along with some elementary tools, you are prepared to deal with most of what comes along. But don't forget the phone number of your insurance company. Likewise, if you are likely to meet those in need, be like the Good Samaritan: be prepared with first aid kit, transportation and the money. Make it a habit.
- ✚ In a similar sense you should prepare yourself with a ready defense of the gospel. You are a Christian; you can count on others challenging the reasons for your faith. If you don't know why you believe, perhaps you should find out. Do you really think they're going to be impressed with, "he's real in my heart?"
- ✚ Finally, equip yourself with hope. As a Christian you will live forever after the resurrection of the dead. Keep that in your heart; it changes your perspective on a lot of things.

Lamps Lit

Of course, your words alone are insufficient. The lamp in this parable is used as it is in other parables to mean your good deeds. Some good deeds can be done in the manner of a stealth bomber, but most of them stick out. Other people are going to see them — particularly if they are the recipients of the deed. This is the usual interpretation of this passage.

However, to the Jew of this time there would be an echo. It comes from Psalm 119:

Psalms 119:105 NASB Your word is a lamp to my feet And a light to my path.

That's how they'd see it; by keeping the lamp lit they would mean the study of the Scriptures. This in no way contradicts previous interpretation but adds to it nicely. There is a third use as well:

Matthew 6:22 NASB "The eye is the lamp of the body; so then if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light.

This is a little bit more difficult to understand. It implies that you have a way of looking at things which clears up the confusion of our world. Through your eyes, the world should make sense. Others may see it as chaos; you see it as creation. This is the Christian view, and it is unique among religions. We know the creator; we see his creation — and we know the hope that he provides. Things look different when you know the right answers.

His Return

The parable ends as many prophetic ones do: with a warning about the return of our Lord. We will go into this more in the next two parables, but there are three things that you should get immediately:

- ✚ First, his return will be unexpected. It will be a surprise to an awful lot of people.
- ✚ Second, he will bring with him salvation in the flesh at the resurrection of the dead.
- ✚ Third, he will bring with him the reward for each Christian.

Laborers in the Vineyard

Matthew 20:1-16 NASB "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. (2) "When he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. (3) "And he went out about the third hour

and saw others standing idle in the market place; (4) and to those he said, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' And so they went. (5) "Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. (6) "And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing around; and he *said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day long?' (7) "They *said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He *said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' (8) "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard *said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first.' (9) "When those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius. (10) "When those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. (11) "When they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, (12) saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.' (13) "But he answered and said to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? (14) 'Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. (15) 'Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?' (16) "So the last shall be first, and the first last."

Distinction

It is surprisingly rare to encounter a Christian who understands the difference between what God can do and what God will do. We seek to have no hesitation about asking God anything that he can do, but we are rather reluctant first ask the question what he will do. His view is different than ours. That difference is what this parable is all about.

Finite Expectations

One of the difficulties of Christianity is that we are finite, and God is not. We tend to lead our lives this way:

- ✚ There is only so much to go around. We have limited resources; we can only do so much.
- ✚ We are responsible to God for what we do with those limited resources — we must make wise use of them.
- ✚ When it comes to giving things away (like money), we have our standards. We are much more willing to give to those who are deserving than those we think are cheating the system.
- ✚ We project ourselves on God; we assume he has the same problem. But he doesn't.

The Infinite God

We might well begin by pointing out that this parable has reference to salvation, not reward. The distinction is clear throughout the Scripture; the evil tax collector who repents on the last day of his life gets the same salvation that the devout Christian of 80 years would get. Our finite minds sometimes have difficulty with that. We need to understand God's point of view. For that, we need to make a side trip into mathematics.

If you ask most people what infinity means, they will tell you it's a real big number. It is actually quite different from that. A real big number is finite; infinity is, well, infinite. Let's look at how this works. Let's suppose that you have a hotel with an infinite number of rooms. All of those rooms are occupied, when a new guest arrives. How do you handle the situation? You simply move the person in

room number one to room number two, number two and number three and so on. Since numbers go on infinitely this is not a problem.

But suppose that you now have an infinite number of new guests. Again, the problem is easy to solve. You move the guest in room one into room two, room two into room four and so on. There are an infinite number of even numbers, so your existing guests will fit in even numbered rooms. We also have an infinite number of odd numbers, so your new guests will occupy those rooms.

Simplicity itself, right?

God's grace is infinite. It comes from his own character, and he is infinite. Grace is his free gift, not something we have earned. He is therefore infinitely able to be generous with us. Christ points out in this parable that some of us will have a problem with this. But, as he argues here, it's God's decision to be generous. It is not ours to complain about. All of us will receive the free gift of salvation, whether we worked 80 years in the church or 80 days.

Talents

Matthew 25:14-30 NASB "For it is just like a man about to go on a journey, who called his own slaves and entrusted his possessions to them. (15) "To one he gave five talents, to another, two, and to another, one, each according to his own ability; and he went on his journey. (16) "Immediately the one who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and gained five more talents. (17) "In the same manner the one who had received the two talents gained two more. (18) "But he who received the one talent went away, and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. (19) "Now after a long time the master of those slaves *came and *settled accounts with them. (20) "The one who had received the five talents came up and brought five more talents, saying, 'Master, you entrusted five talents to me. See, I have gained five more talents.' (21) "His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' (22) "Also the one who had received the two talents came up and said, 'Master, you entrusted two talents to me. See, I have gained two more talents.' (23) "His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' (24) "And the one also who had received the one talent came up and said, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed. (25) 'And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours.' (26) "But his master answered and said to him, 'You wicked, lazy slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I scattered no seed. (27) 'Then you ought to have put my money in the bank, and on my arrival I would have received my money back with interest. (28) 'Therefore take away the talent from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents.' (29) "For to everyone who has, more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away. (30) "Throw out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Risk and Faith

Most Christians do not think of gambling as a professional occupation. That attitude sometimes extends into our thoughts about risk. Most of us want to avoid risk as much as possible; we want a sure

thing. The difficulty for the Christian is simply this: faith requires risk. It is in the very nature of faith but you must take a risk. That's why you often hear of "a leap of faith." Faith requires trust; that trust always involves the risk that it will fail. If you are going to play the game, there must be the possibility that you will lose.

Why is this intrinsic to faith? It's because faith looks forward, towards the future. Since we don't know the future in all detail, there is a risk that we will be handling it wrong. There is a reason the bookies don't accept bets on yesterday's horse races. Do you now see that the leap of faith is inevitable? It cannot be otherwise; or it's not faith.

Risk is the other side of hope. Hope is a Christian virtue; we are commanded to have it. At the return of our Lord our hope will be satisfied, but in the meanwhile we live in hope — which means we live in risk.

Wicked, Lazy

Since risk is inevitable to the faith, and must be accompanied by hope, to fail to take the risk presented to you is indeed be sinful. It is to say to Christ that you're not really sure that he exists or that he will save, but he does return you'd like to be on the correct side. Risk doesn't work that way. So it is with the master this parable condemns his servant for doing nothing.

- ✚ He calls him wicked. The word in the Greek does not mean you evil intrinsically, but rather implies an evil effect. It's a consequence, not a character. So it is that we can think ourselves being good people, frugally tucking away in the ground that which God has given us, and discover our unrighteousness only when our Master returns.
- ✚ He calls him lazy. The word itself implies someone who is lagging behind; a straggler, in other words. No doubt the servant had good intentions; he was going to fight the good fight — someday. But he's a straggler and never quite gets to the front lines.
- ✚ This is a sin of omission. If God gives you something, he intends for you to use it and will hold you accountable for what you do with it.

Do you see now, the fear of risk in the faith is the equivalent of evil to which God. For many of us, as for this man, this is generated by our fear of responsibility. We often hear single women complain that men are afraid of the "C" word — commitment. You might give some thought to that; most scholars don't think of this parable as having anything to do with marriage. But it's just possible they are wrong.

Entrusted with Little

One of the points often overlooked about this parable is the fact that the master entrusted the servant with only one talent. Evidently he knew the man and his character; he felt he had to leave him something, but he will not take too much a risk on a man like this. He knew that he was risk averse, not inclined to take any chances with it. So he gave him the minimum risk he could. If things went totally wrong, the master would be out only one talent. His hope was that he would be able to compliment the servant on having done something with the talent.

When it comes to reward, the actual specifics of the award will vary greatly. But you will hear either "well done, good and faithful servant" or the simple word, "worthless." You are in complete control of this result. The key is to take heed what your Lord has given you, and act accordingly.

Parables on Prayer - Luke 18:1-14

The first section of this lesson may seem a bit deep. The truth is that any writer on the Scriptures faces the temptation to get drunk with his own words – the trick is to make sure you don't drown in them.

Intolerable Problems

The two parables which we are about to read bring with them some intolerable problems of logic.

Why Am I Praying?

The question has been asked in a number of ways. I propose to put it this way: "if God already knows what I'm going to pray about, why am I praying?" Have you ever had that feeling? Let's take a look at a few of the reasons why you should pray even though God knows what you're about to say.

- ✚ Prayer is, first and foremost, an act of reason. You are beseeching the Lord God Almighty; to do so, you must use your brain. Using your brain is something that human beings do – it's what makes them rational creatures. If you will, we can phrase this as "you were given a brain, now use it." Reasoning is something that human beings do, and the higher the better. It is therefore fitting for you to use what God has given you when you talk to him.
- ✚ Prayer also acknowledges God as the creator and sustainer of the universe. The mere fact that you pray acknowledges him for who he is (or at least should). This is fitting and proper, even if you have nothing particular to say to him tonight.
- ✚ Perhaps the most compelling argument is this: the one man who knew whether or not predestination works in what ever way was Jesus of Nazareth. He knew the answer to this question. He was a man of prayer. So, we may never get a good answer this side of heaven – but whatever the answer is, it implies that you and I should pray.

Predestination

The other problem concerns the matter of predestination. If God knows the future, and knows what's going to happen to you in the future, why would you bother to pray? It's already fixed; you can't change a thing. It is interesting that those whose particular denomination includes a belief in predestination tend to long explanations here.

- ✚ To begin with, the Scripture has many warnings on the subject of prayer. There is no Scripture of which I am aware which says, "Don't bother." The truth is consistent; we may not know the answer to predestination but we can certainly read the commandment to prayer.
- ✚ Next, is everything predestined? Right down to your shoe size? Or is it simply God stands out of time, being eternal. To see something happen is not cause it to happen.
- ✚ It is also quite possible that while we cannot thwart the will of God in prayer, we might be able to move along a little faster.

That God sustains the universe is well known; it's called Providence. Why he would allow us requests to meddle with his Providence I do not know; I only know that he commands us to do so.

Does God Hear Sinners?

I sure hope so. Even the most righteous among us are sinners; and there are those among us who are prayer warriors whose lives are a living testimony to the power of prayer. Somebody out there is getting this to work – therefore we may conclude that God hears the prayers even though those of us who can admit we are sinners.

Persistence

Luke 18:1-8 NASB Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, (2) saying, "In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man. (3) "There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, 'Give me legal protection from my opponent.' (4) "For a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, 'Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, (5) yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.'" (6) And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge *said; (7) now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? (8) "I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?"

The Widow

Story telling is an art. In that art there are certain conventions. These are shortcuts for the author to evoke your understanding. The widow is just such a figure:

- ✚ Figuratively, she represents the poor and the powerless. An elderly widow was dependent upon her family, or worse her late husband's family.
- ✚ In law, she was quite handicapped. The courts of this time considered a woman's word as being worth half that of a man. The result of this is that often enough the small property which was left to the widow was taken by deceit.
- ✚ Please note what is not said about this widow: she has not introduced to us as a super prayer warrior. She is not noble and righteous; she is ordinary.

The Unjust Judge

The judge in this case would also be a well-known figure to those listening to him. The wording of the parable suggests that this is a judge by Roman law. The Romans were very proud of the fact that when they conquered someplace they brought it law and justice. This was generally true. But any system of law is no better than the people who implement it. In this instance most Jews would have seen someone who was Jewish being hired for this job. In other words, he was a traitor on whom you had no way to apply social pressure. There was no sense talking to his mother. Likely enough Christ's hearers would have assumed that he was corrupt and taking bribes.

The widow does not approach him by supernatural means. She simply wears the man out. The Greek phrasing for this is quite interesting; it means to put circles under someone's eyes. In short, what she did was to nag, pester, bite and bullyrag the man into doing what he was supposed to do in the first place.

Christ then uses this as an example by comparison. His argument is simple; if you can get the crooked judge from the sap sucking Romans to do what he supposed to do, how much easier is it to get God to listen to your prayers? God, after all, loves you.

Always Pray

So we are to pray always. Just what does that mean?

- ✚ The usual interpretation is that we are to pray without ceasing. This is sometimes taken to an extreme point, but in general this is the first good meaning to it. Don't stop. Whatever it is you're asking the Lord, keep asking until you get an answer. (Remember that "no" is an answer.)
- ✚ Consider, however, that it can also mean that we are to pray in all things. Have you ever fallen into the trap that says, "Oh, that's too trivial to bother God with?" That is a severe underestimation of God Almighty.
- ✚ It can also mean, "no matter how hopeless."

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

Luke 18:9-14 NASB And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: (10) "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. (11) "The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. (12) 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' (13) "But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' (14) "I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The Pharisee

Let's begin with the obvious which is so often overlooked. The Pharisee is definitely more righteous. Fasting two times a week is far more than the once a year fasting required on the Day of Atonement. He tithes his agricultural produce, but he also tithes the little herbs from his garden. He is indeed the working definition of a righteous man in Jewish society of the time.

His problem is not his obedience; it's his attitude. He clearly despises the tax collector. That's understandable; the tax collector would be seen as a traitor to the Jews cooperating with the invading Romans. More than that, he is also judgmental towards the man. If you want a working example of "do not judge", this is a good one — in the negative sense.

Worse yet: he knows that God agrees with him. He's just repeating the simple facts as far as he's concerned. But did you notice this — what, exactly, did he ask God for? To be exact, he asked for nothing. He got it.

The Tax Collector

In a very curious way, this tax collector is an honest man. Most of the Jews would not have agreed with that statement; tax collectors were notorious for skimming and for just plain fraud. But look at the man's honest heart:

- ✚ He knew himself to be a sinner. There is no salvation until that realization sets in.
- ✚ He knew that he was not "worthy." He didn't try to convince God that he was.
- ✚ But he did know exactly what he wanted: mercy. That's what he asked for; that's what he got.

Problems

This Pharisee brings up two problems which are common to Christians even to this day:

- ✚ The first is the concept of righteousness by comparison. It's the idea that because I'm a better man than so-and-so over there, then I must be okay. That's a little obvious; so our Pharisee covers it with a formality. He puts the comparison into a sentence that nominally is about thanksgiving. Sometimes we do the same thing; it's called praying for someone.
- ✚ The other problem is righteousness by works. The idea here is that we can do enough good work that we put God in our debt. Sometimes, we do this because it keeps our mind off of repentance.

So When You Pray

So when you pray, you might remember these things.

- ✚ God knows you — and is not fooled in the least. Therefore, do not lie to him.
- ✚ If you pray out loud, don't lie to the rest of us either.
- ✚ *Particularly* do not lie to your self.

Humble yourself in the sight of the Lord, and he will lift you up. The contrite, penitent heart is heard at the throne of God.

National Prophecy

Fruits

Luke 13:1-9 NASB Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. (2) And Jesus said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate? (3) "I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. (4) "Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? (5) "I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." (6) And He began telling this parable: "A man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and did not find any. (7) "And he said to the vineyard-keeper, 'Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?' (8) "And he answered and said to him, 'Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; (9) and if it bears fruit next year, fine; but if not, cut it down.'"

Why Did God?

One of the unchanging assumptions that human beings make – well, most human beings — is that the word "normal" really means my circumstances, use to measure others. So if I look at you and see that you are, for example, less wealthy than I am I can assume that you are defective in this matter of wealth. That's because I'm normal. On the other hand, if you have more money than I have then you are rich. This carries over into moral judgments as well. If you're worse than I am, a greater sinner, then if you suffer I clearly noted as being suffering because you did something wrong. You deserve it. On the other hand if things are better for you (and bad for me) then it's obvious that I am the one who is suffering nobly.

That's how most of us view the subject of suffering. If you extend that viewpoint into the question of where you're going to spend eternity, your answer is to find some folks who are obviously worse than you are and say, "Those are the people going to hell." Since you are better than those people it logically follows that you are going to heaven. We shall see that this is not at all the case.

Christ's Response

That's the issue that Christ is attacking here. Apparently there were some Galilean rebels who got caught at it, and some workman who had a fatal work accident. The times being what they were, everyone assumed that God punished them for their misdeeds. If you knew one of them was a really good guy, you'd say he was some sort of secret sinner. But Christ replies that they are all sinners. If they are sinners, they are in need of repentance and the salvation that only Christ can bring.

Of course, the Christian of today has a couple of other answers. While it doesn't apply to fatalities, if you are suffering from some disease or other form of irritation it may be assumed that God is preparing you for some particular task. You're not being punished, you're being prepared. This goes a long way in modern times to explaining away the fact that we all suffer and that we are all sinners. It doesn't matter how good we are compared to somebody else.

National Sin

Note, please, that immediately after telling you this Christ then comes forward with this parable. Its interpretation is relatively simple. The fig tree has long been noted as a symbol of Israel, particularly a fig tree planted in a vineyard (which would have the best soil). Most of us would interpret it as being applicable only to an individual. We would see it and say that means we are to produce the fruit of righteousness in our lives. This is true. But not exhaustive.

What Christ is introducing to us is the concept of a national sin. Our nation of rugged individualists tends to think this cannot possibly exist. God, on the other hand, castigates Israel for their national sin frequently in the Old Testament. He makes it clear that in some portion he hold you accountable for the sins of your society. One of the holiest men to ever walk the planet expressed his national repentance. The man was Daniel; you will find his prayer in Daniel chapter 9.

Please note the delay. It is God's intention that the nation should not suffer, but rather it should be redeemed and lifted up. Any nation which claims to be a nation of godly people runs the risk of being ripped out of the ground. I leave it to the reader to determine if that point has arrived for the American Republic.

Wicked Husbandmen

Luke 20:9-18 NASB And He began to tell the people this parable: "A man planted a vineyard and rented it out to vine-growers, and went on a journey for a long time. (10) "At the harvest time he sent a slave to the vine-growers, so that they would give him some of the produce of the vineyard; but the vine-growers beat him and sent him away empty-handed. (11) "And he proceeded to send another slave; and they beat him also and treated him shamefully and sent him away empty-handed. (12) "And he proceeded to send a third; and this one also they wounded and cast out. (13) "The owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.' (14) "But when the vine-growers saw him, they reasoned with one another, saying, 'This is the heir; let us kill him so that the inheritance will be ours.' (15) "So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What, then, will the owner of the vineyard do to them? (16) "He will come and destroy these vine-growers and will give the vineyard to others." When they heard it, they said, "May it never be!" (17) But Jesus looked at them and said, "What then is this that is written: 'THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone'? (18) "Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust."

The Parable Itself

It is worth noting that this parable occurs in the context of the Pharisees challenging Christ's authority. It is quite clear that he is referencing his own arrival when he talks about the son of the vineyard owner. The servants would be the prophets of course. A glance at the history of Israel throughout the Old Testament will tell you that time and again the Jews rejected the prophets sent to them. That much is clear; his opponents certainly understood it as such. But he introduces something new in this passage.

Old Testament Prophecy

If you examine the concept of a stone which becomes the chief cornerstone, or is used to smite the Jews, you will find these connections:

- ✚ Daniel's smiting stone. In Daniel 2:34-35 we see the prophetic picture of the stone cut out without hands smiting the Earth and growing to be a huge mountain. Virtually every Christian commentator will tell you that stone is Christ, and its growth represents the growth of the body of Christ overcoming the world.
- ✚ In Psalm 118:22-23 we find the prophecy that this stone will be rejected, as Christ was by the Jews.
- ✚ In Isaiah 28:16 we see that this will be a costly cornerstone, referring to the sacrifice Christ made at the Cross.
- ✚ If that's not clear enough, then read Zechariah 3:9. In that passage it is prophesied that this stone will take away the sins of the nation *in one day*.
- ✚ The stumbling stone is detailed for us in Isaiah 8:13-15.

This point most Christians don't want to study. Jesus is supposed to be a nice guy; what's this business with the stumbling stone? The answer is rather straightforward. If you are one of those people we described earlier who is sure of heaven because after all you're better than somebody, the smiting stone hits you. If you in fact accept him, you will find you're going to have to stumble over him and admit you don't know how to walk without him. Jesus, to put it simply, is offensive to a lot of people. His followers often share this characteristic.

Prophetic Fulfillment

We have already talked about the fact that it will take one day to wipe away the sins of the nation: Good Friday. (Now you know why they call it "good.") But for those who do not stumble over the stone we find that it smites and scatters like dust. This was specifically fulfilled in A.D. 70 when the Romans sacked Jerusalem and scattered the Jews to all parts of the known world.

Jesus is the stone of stumbling; it's a hard fact. He does not change with the times, nor does he adapt to your requirements. The issue really is one of pride versus repentance. A lot of people out there will go along with Mister Nice Guy and be proud of it. Jesus tells us that we need to seek him in repentance and humility. To put it in these terms, we must stumble over him — for he will not be moved.

Marriage of the King's Son

Matthew 22:1-14 NASB Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying, (2) "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. (3) "And he sent out his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding feast, and they were unwilling to come. (4) "Again he sent out other slaves saying, "Tell those who have been invited, "Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are all butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast." (5) "But they paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business, (6) and the rest seized his slaves and mistreated them and killed them. (7) "But the king was enraged, and he sent his armies and destroyed those murderers and set their city on fire. (8) "Then he *said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. (9) 'Go therefore to the main highways, and as many as you find there, invite to the wedding feast.' (10) "Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered together all they found, both evil and good; and the wedding hall was filled with dinner

guests. (11) "But when the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw a man there who was not dressed in wedding clothes, (12) and he *said to him, 'Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?' And the man was speechless. (13) "Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' (14) "For many are called, but few are chosen."

Customs

Life was rather different in those days, particularly as regarding the measurement of time. For most people there were only three times of the day that they could we determine accurately: sunrise, local noon and sunset. It was therefore common when you made an appointment that you would specify the day but not the hour. It was normal for a feast like this to send out the servants to get the guests.

Another custom of the time which might not be as familiar today is the use of wedding clothes. Casual dress having taken hold, we do not see much in the way of wedding clothing. Our weddings used to be a bit more formal, and people wore suits and dresses. In those days people had specific clothes that they were to weddings – sort of like that sombrero you got on your last trip to Mexico. You don't know when you get to wear it but it's really fancy. These two customs are somewhat strange to us, but they were very useful in the time.

Meanings

The meaning of the parable is rather straightforward:

- ✚ The guests were, of course, the Jews. God's promise to the Jews is that they would have the Messiah. Obviously, they would get "first crack" at the Messiah. This is why Christ never left the boundaries of ancient Israel in his adult ministry.
- ✚ The destruction of those guests by the angry King is generally held to have been accomplished in A.D. 70, at the sack of Jerusalem.
- ✚ Sending out the guests to roust up people to come to the wedding from the lanes and outdoors is nothing more than the evangelism of the church to the entire Gentile world. How about that feast? It's difficult to pin this down to a past event, but Revelation is clear that there will be the wedding supper of the Lamb — and it will be glorious.
- ✚ Wedding clothes take on new meaning here. As we see in Revelation 19:8, close stand for the righteous acts of the Saints. So the fellow that thrown out without wedding clothes is someone who accepted Christianity, but never did anything about it.

America Today

Will you please note with me one thing? That fellow the Christ threw out the wedding feast — did you notice that he called him, "Friend?" It's a warning to us. This nation, Christian since its founding, now exhibits the characteristics of the world gone mad. What's missing in our understanding is that Christ's judgment will fall upon a nation as well as an individual. Let me take up two areas with you:

- ✚ The first is the question of charity. I will not speak to the amount of money given at this church, for we are one of the wealthiest congregations of America. Giving money has never been much of a problem here. The difficulty comes in the charity which is personal. Writing a check is easy; forgiving your neighbor his offense is hard. Have you noticed that we have grown more and more apart lately?

✚ It is not clear to most evangelicals that this is so. But if you will take a look through the Old Testament you will see that God commands of his people that they act in justice. He calls himself a defender of the widow and the fatherless, those who are so easily disadvantaged in a court of law. What do we do with the down and out people we know? My father had a saying about this: the character of a Christian gentleman is tested by how he deals with the invisible people. Invisible? Yes, those whose jobs are to serve you coffee, get you on the airplane, answer the phone when you have a complaint and so on — these are the invisible people. How you treat them?

I told you this lesson is about prophecy. Please walk away with these three lessons:

- ✚ First, that his judgment will come upon the nation as well as the individual.
- ✚ Second, that he will return at a time when he is unexpected by the world — and a lot of people are going to discover to their horror just who they have been.
- ✚ Third, that the issue is not whether or not you belong to the right church with the right name on the door, but how you treated others in Christ's name.

We do not know the day and hour, but the signs of the time are there for anyone to read. The Jews are in Jerusalem; they are in nation once again. Play with that how you will, it cannot be meaningless.

Christian Life - Various Scriptures

The Unjust Steward

Luke 16:1-9 NASB Now He was also saying to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and this manager was reported to him as squandering his possessions. (2) "And he called him and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an accounting of your management, for you can no longer be manager.' (3) "The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig; I am ashamed to beg. (4) 'I know what I shall do, so that when I am removed from the management people will welcome me into their homes.' (5) "And he summoned each one of his master's debtors, and he began saying to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' (6) "And he said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' (7) "Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' And he said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He *said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' (8) "And his master praised the unrighteous manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light. (9) "And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness, so that when it fails, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings.

Who's Who

One of the principles used in interpreting the parables of Christ is that each actor represents someone else. In this particular instance, we have:

- ✚ The rich man — who represents God. It's clear that each of us will give an accounting to God of what we did. If you will, God "fires" the manager, which is approximately parallel to have him die.
- ✚ The manager, on the other hand, represents each of us. We cannot be perfectly righteous, and God himself will call us to account. The real question is, what are we going to do about it before hand?
- ✚ The debtors represent the rest of humanity. Each of them is in debt to God, that is to say, none of us are perfect. What's interesting here is that they eagerly take an adjustment to their bill from the manager.

The accountant in the room will now object that such a procedure cannot be supported. The reader will carefully note the double entry bookkeeping was invented in the late Middle Ages by the Italians. Before that time you had to trust your manager. So in Christ's time this parable would be something that really could have happened.

Options

Our unrighteous manager now must consider his options. He discovers three things he can do:

- ✚ He can take his fat, old body out to the streets and hire himself out as a ditch digger. Apparently his doctor has advised him that this is a good way to have a heart attack, and therefore he rejects this option. Getting old is not for sissies.
- ✚ He could select some cardboard and a marker to make a sign. Then sit by the freeway off ramp, plastic cup in hand and looking forlorn. Notice the reaction: shame. It's tantamount to admitting to the entire world that he mismanaged the rich man's resources, and now is completely reduced to the bottom of society as a beggar. I wonder how many of us really could go out to freeway off ramp and beg.

- ✦ What he selects is known today as networking — formerly known as friends. He shrewdly sets about making friends with his master's debtors. By such measures he makes himself welcome at anyone's feast.

That last requires some explaining. Remember that there is no such thing as refrigeration or freezers in this time. So if you are going to barbecue a steak, you have to use up an entire cow. The way you did this was by inviting your friends over for a feast — for which they later reciprocated. Our manager here is going to be a frequent diner at other people's feasts.

Okay — let's see if we can make some sense of this.

Stewardship

We can find a number of lessons in Christian life in this parable. All the things we will find, though, are related to the concept of stewardship. Specifically:

- ✦ All that we have is given to us by God. It is, after all, his universe. If you think it's yours permanently, try giving it away 10 minutes after you're dead.
- ✦ God not only expects us to take good care of his universe (and the particular bits he's put in our care) but ultimately he will demand an accounting. This is more commonly known as Judgment Day.
- ✦ The surprise is this: he expects us to use it to benefit others. This stuff is temporary, but we can make eternal use of it.

As the song says, he is no fool if he would choose to give the things he cannot keep to buy the things he can never lose.

One final point from this one: in regard to the matters of this world the children of light are not nearly as shrewd as the children of this world. This is how it should be. I leave it to the reader to explain why.

Friend at Midnight

Luke 11:5-8 NASB Then He said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and goes to him at midnight and says to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; (6) for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; (7) and from inside he answers and says, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' (8) "I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs.

Signs of the Times

This passage makes a little more sense if you know something about the way people lived during this time. The concept of having a locking door with the key existed — but was commonly used in prison cells. The average house would not have such a thing; it was secured like a barn might be secured on a farm. The house itself likely had only one bedroom, with one very large bed. It was the custom of the time to keep that bed warm at night by having everybody in the family sleep in it.

Now you can see why the fellow was a little reluctant to get up. He was going to have to break that warmth, step over the kids (probably waking the kids) to supply what he probably saw as his

neighbor's failure to bake. The lady of the house might be particularly annoyed that the husband would do such a thing.

The Man in Bed

Most interpretations of this particular parable focus on the fellow who's banging on the door. From this we are to learn persistence in prayer. But let's take a look at it from the other side — can learn some lessons from a fellow in bed? Perhaps even apply them to ourselves?

- ✚ The man is peeved at the inconvenience. It's not a catastrophe; it's just that he had his things lined up the way he wanted them. It's an annoyance. But is it surprising the lack of charity that comes from simple annoyance? How often do we fail to be charitable simply because it's inconvenient? Those guys with the roadside signs always seem to be on the roadside.
- ✚ He could also be mad at his neighbor's lack of foresight. He might feel himself justified in refusing to do anything. After all, the man doesn't deserve it. It's his own fault; or at least, the faults of his wife.
- ✚ One thing is clear: he is trying to say "no." He doesn't want to do this. Had he been asked while he was still out and about, he probably would've said yes without too much difficulty. His expectation was a good night's sleep; you know how human beings are when their expectations are not met.
- ✚ His neighbor wants three loaves of bread. It's unlikely that his wife is baked any much more than that, so this means she'll have to get up bright and early to bake some more. At least one scholar identifies the three loaves as the customary gift to a departing traveler. There were no preservatives in the bread of that time, so it would be pretty stale after three loaves.

In this man's behavior we can see several problems. He has a chance to be charitable, and dismisses it because it's not convenient. He thinks ill of his neighbor for failing to prepare, even though the parable implies that he had no idea a visitor was coming. Satan will get some mileage out of this man's attitude. We, therefore, should learn to do the opposite. Consider: how often have you been peeved at some minor problem in the neighborhood when you could've considered an opportunity to be charitable?

What Would God Have Us Do?

Let's make a mental list: who are the inconvenient, unwelcome neighbors for each of us? Is it the lady next door with the barking dogs? Is it the fellow who wants to borrow a left-handed crescent wrench? Or is it perhaps the woman who has to talk to somebody, and you're somebody. Whoever they are they want something material; or you, or your time and patience, or both. We have already learned that material things are used for eternal purposes by giving them away. We need to address time and patience, then.

If you ask most Christians, they will agree that "my time is my own." Really? Then try putting it in a bottle and giving me 15 min. worth of it. You can't. Your time is not your own; it's God's, and he's only loaning it to you. Included in that loan are the talkative neighbors and the barking dogs. C S Lewis once remarked that if we were asked by our Lord, in his bodily form, to devote the next 24 hours absolutely to his service that none of us would refuse. If he then told us that the service he wanted was to listen to an old woman chatter for half an hour, we would be terribly disappointed. We would say, "that's it?" Lewis then points out that we have indeed been asked for the next 24 hours (and the rest of our lives) — just not in bodily form. Perhaps we need to re-examine our attitudes towards others in this regard. My wife has a method in this. It involves our grandchildren. Which ever grandchild is on her lap

at the moment is the most wonderful grandchild of all. She has three favorite grandchildren. Perhaps we need to have three favorite neighbors.

Two Builders

Matthew 7:24-27 NASB "Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. (25) "And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. (26) "Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. (27) "The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell--and great was its fall.

Life with Contractors

it happens that the author of this paper has been through several versions of hiring a contractor to make additions to my house or corrections to my house. There are several things I have noticed about contractors. The first is that they're very promising people; they promise you certain things at certain time. Delivery is another matter. It seems a contractor is always late and there are always things that he forgot in the construction. But once you get to a specific stage in the construction, whatever they left out is gone forever. It is therefore advised, should you happen to have need of a contractor, that you exercise great diligence in overseeing his work, get everything in writing, and remember you have only one shot to get this right.

Parallels

The two builders here represent the two basic options in life. Please recall that I said to exercise great diligence over your contractor. The same is true (and with much greater reason) in your life. You are only going to get one shot at life. You have to make it a good one.

As Jesus points out here, the key thing to getting your building right is the foundation. Many, many things can be fixed with spackling, paint and of course duct tape. Many, but not all things. If the foundation is not set correctly there is no way to fix the problem. So you need to set the right foundation. This metaphor for life is used several times in the New Testament. At every opportunity, the metaphor says that the right foundation is Jesus Christ. I would point out two things:

- ✚ First, we are dealing with the foundation. That means everything else in life rests upon this. If Jesus Christ is not number one in your life, the basis on which you live, you are getting it wrong. If you have "done a corner" in Christ, you have the wrong foundation.
- ✚ Second, the foundation is not something that you manufacture as much as you put in place. You do not get a choice in this matter. You need to use the Jesus who is, or invent something else (even if you put his name on it).

Choices

This is the fundamental choice that all Christians get. It breaks out this way: you can select Christ as your foundation, or you can select anything this world offers — the flesh, the world or pride. You know the risk of doing that. But there is another point as well. You can hear the Word, nod yes and do nothing. Or you can hear the Word and practice it. It is amazing how many people can deceive

themselves into thinking that everything is just fine because they come to church on Sunday. Examine yourself, please. Be like the builder who put upon the rock; hear the Word and be obedient to it.

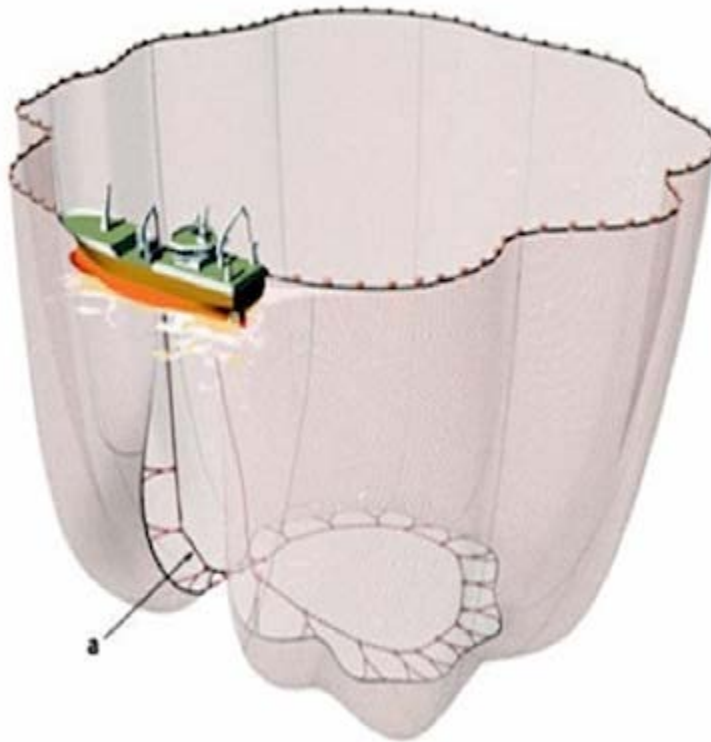
End Times - Various Scriptures

Dragnet

Matthew 13:47-50 NASB "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind; (48) and when it was filled, they drew it up on the beach; and they sat down and gathered the good fish into containers, but the bad they threw away. (49) "So it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous, (50) and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

About Fishing

It helps to know a little bit about commercial fishing. The type of net described here is now known as a purse seine. A diagram is provided for you below:



As you can see, this is quite a large net. It's designed to snare an entire school of fish. It is often used in shallow waters to catch every fish in the area, as the bottom of the net often rests on the bottom of the water. Modern fishing boats can manage a net of this size with one boat; in ancient times it was common to use two boats for such a large net. The advantage of this net is that it catches everything. So Christ's audience here would have known about this kind that quite well. The key fact is this: it catches everything.

Parable Parsed

Understanding this parable is relatively straightforward. The metaphor of the sea, as used in Daniel chapter 7, implies the people of the world. It's no great stretch to think conclude that the net is the preaching of the gospel (fishers of men). The net result is the church as we have it today (pun intended).

That carries with it two important results. The most important one of these for us today is that the church is composed not only of those who are being saved but many who are not. If you happen to be shopping for church this is important news. It tells you that any church congregation you enter is composed of those were going to happen and some were going to hell. As a result, the congregation will not be made up of those who are perfectly behaved, consistently charitable Christians. It will be made up of human beings, with their faults, their forgiveness — or their hypocrisy. More to the point, it is entirely possible that you cannot tell the difference between a poor Christian and hypocrite. The distinction will be important; it's just that you can't make it now. Judge not, that you be not judged.

Sorting

There are three important facts we should apprehend about this sorting out at the end of the age:

- ✚ First, it happens at the end of the age — when Christ returns. There is no reason, therefore, for us to hurry it up and do it ourselves. It's already on the schedule.
- ✚ Second, the sorting is binary. We are not going to be graded like so many eggs, but sorted out to those who go to heaven and those who go to hell. As a result, we need to focus our efforts on what it takes to get in through the narrow way. We must pay attention to what is required of us; and pay no attention to what is fashionable in the church.
- ✚ Third, we are not the ones doing the sorting. That is assigned the angels. Our task is not to judge and separate, but to make disciples.
So, let's see what it takes.

Ten Virgins

Matthew 25:1-13 NASB "Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten virgins, who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. (2) "Five of them were foolish, and five were prudent. (3) "For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, (4) but the prudent took oil in flasks along with their lamps. (5) "Now while the bridegroom was delaying, they all got drowsy and began to sleep. (6) "But at midnight there was a shout, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' (7) "Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. (8) "The foolish said to the prudent, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' (9) "But the prudent answered, 'No, there will not be enough for us and you too; go instead to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' (10) "And while they were going away to make the purchase, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast; and the door was shut. (11) "Later the other virgins also came, saying, 'Lord, lord, open up for us.' (12) "But he answered, 'Truly I say to you, I do not know you.' (13) "Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour.

Wedding Customs

Weddings in those days were somewhat different than they are today in our culture. The celebration would go on for as long as two weeks. Remember, some people might have to walk from the next village or even further to get to your wedding. Besides, which is better: a two-hour reception or a 10 day wedding party?

One of the key events in such a wedding, which is described here, is the night in which the groom kidnaps the bride. This is not the same thing as going on a honeymoon today. In those days the groom and his friends would surprise the parents of the bride in the middle of the night to carry off the bride to the groom's parent's home. This was a rather raucous affair, and often turned into a procession between the two houses. Remember, we're talking about a wedding in a small village here.

The flashlight not having been invented yet, members of this party would carry an oil lamp. This was not, as you might expect, for the purpose of finding your way around the village. It served completely different purpose. You held the lamp up towards your face, so that everyone in the village would recognize who it is that was running around in the dark. It was their way of knowing that you were not a burglar. So if you did not have a lamp you would be thought to be a miscreant of some sort. That's why the groom could say he didn't know the other five virgins; no oil, no identification.

The Multiple Meanings of Oil

There are several meanings for the oil, spiritually speaking.

- ✚ The most common metaphor is that oil is used to give light. So Christ admonishes us to let our good works shine before men. Most interpreters think this is the meaning of the parable here. The foolish virgins did not have those good works which mark the true Christian.
- ✚ Another meaning can be seen in this: oil is often the symbol of the Holy Spirit. We still speak of anointing by the Spirit. This gives us much the same meaning, as a "Christian" without the Holy Spirit is indeed a fraud.
- ✚ The Jew of this time would also know (from the Psalms) the concept of the "oil of joy." In this, we would see that sense of joy that always accompanies a wedding (or should). If you don't know the difference between happiness and joy, I don't think I can explain it to you. If you do, then know that "oil" is a symbol for such a joy.

Wedding of the Lamb

Of course, the ultimate symbolism of a wedding is given to us in Revelation. It is unfortunate that today the church has largely dropped the idea that Christian marriage is a living picture of the relationship between Christ and his church. A sermon on the subject of marriage generally includes a good deal of popular psychology and very little (if any) mention of this concept. The early church saw it quite differently. Your wedding is supposed to be the start of a relationship which models that of Christ and the church. The groom, in this parable, is Christ at his return. The bride – whom he snatches out of her home at an unknown time — is the church. So from this we may conclude:

- ✚ Once again, no one knows the exact time and date at which Christ will return.
- ✚ Whenever it is, it will be a joyous occasion for those who are true Christians.
- ✚ Some of us think we're going to be included – and won't be.

The foolish are those who have refused to have the good works which should be natural to a Christian. Perhaps it's time to check how much oil you have on hand.

Weak Doctrine

One of the effects of no longer teaching the idea that human marriage is in any way related to the wedding of Christ and the church is that we do not see it as a practical thing. The early church saw it differently; in particular, counseling a husband concerning the difficulties in his marriage started with the example of the love Christ had given for his church. That love is a requirement of all Christian husbands. This gets a bit of lip service, but is considered of no use in practical Christian counseling. The result is that the husband is not held to the standard of the church, but is taught to seek a compromise that is acceptable to both husband and wife.

The results of this decision are predictable. If there is no high and hard claim upon the husbands love, it soon becomes apparent that matrimony is a convenience — and not a holy one. The early church saw marriage as something which was solemn and sacred, watched over by God himself. This is a view which is seldom encountered today. That does not make it false, just rare.

The reason this is a tragedy is that most of us learn by example. If you want to learn how to love your wife you need a good example. That's why we are given Christ and the church as an example — so that the husband will know how committed he must be in loving his wife.

Fig Tree Leafing

Mark 13:28-30 NASB "Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. (29) "Even so, you too, when you see these things happening, recognize that He is near, right at the door. (30) "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.

Signs of the Times

This is one of those parables that by itself explain practically nothing. What is telling us here is that there will be certain signs of the times that say Christ will soon return. Here are a few of those signs of the times that you need to look for:

- ✚ Expect wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes, political upheaval — these are things that are normal in the human existence. They look huge at the time, they may even have some local significance in God's plan, but they are not signs of his return.
- ✚ Several passages indicate to us that the last age of the church will be Laodicean. It will be a lukewarm church at the heart; though such churches do not think of themselves as being lukewarm. As Revelation reminds us, they see themselves as being nearly perfect. So it seems to you that your church is highly enthusiastic about nothing in particular, perhaps this is a sign. Particularly if it's repeated in every other congregation you know.
- ✚ False prophets? Of course! There are any number of miraculous healers showing themselves on television; just send money.
- ✚ Towards the end, there will be an increase in betrayal of Christians and hatred of Christians. It is a very curious combination. How is it that the lukewarm church produces an increase in the hatred of Christians? Shouldn't it work the other way? Perhaps this is why it is considered a sign of the times.

Trigger Events

Of course, you (I call of the rest of us) would like to have some sure signs that you can point to and say, "now I know he's coming very soon." There are several such events identified by differing schemes; here are three that are pretty universally accepted:

- ✚ The return of the Jews to Palestine and in particular to Jerusalem. The timing of these events is given variously by the particularly different theories of Revelation. However, all of them agree that the return of the Jews to Palestine and Jerusalem is in fact a sign that the coming of Christ is near.
- ✚ One sign which has yet to be seen is that given in Daniel: the "abomination of desolation." This requires the reconstruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Such a Temple is described, prophetically, in the book of Ezekiel. Not all theories hold to this particular sign of the times. But if it does occur, it would be very highly visible.
- ✚ The preaching of the gospel to all the nations is also such a sign. There is some dispute about what "all the nations" means. The original in the Greek seems to indicate all of the Roman Empire. That would be the common interpretation of what was said at the time. However, in our day we might look at it as prophecy and say that this means to every people group on the planet. Starting in the 19th century this became a common goal of the evangelical organizations.

Knowing When — or — Being Prepared

Let's be particularly clear about this: knowing when Christ returns is *trivial* compared to being prepared for his return. We are told that no one knows the time anyway; even if we did know the time we would still have to prepare. So here's what you should be doing while you are waiting the return of our Lord:

- ✚ Study the Scriptures. In them you find the signs of the times; in them you find the way in which you should walk. There is no substitute for this. Curiously, the church in the last 20 years has consistently deemphasized the study of the Scriptures. Reading the Bible is not hip, cool or with it. It's just necessary.
- ✚ All the study in the world does you no good if you do not put what you learn into practice. Faith without works is dead. If your life does not blossom with good works you are going to miss the narrow way. Having the right doctrine, knowing the exact minute when Christ will return and all the words to the hymn the Angels will sing won't help you a bit if you do not have good works.
- ✚ Beware. There are those who will attempt to lead you and others astray. That's yet another reason to read Scriptures. Do not be fooled. If it looks too good to be true — for example, the prosperity gospel — it probably is.

There it is. The day is coming when all will be gathered together, sorted out and sent to heaven and hell. Those going to heaven have the right faith and the works to prove it. Do not be deceived, but follow the one true Christ.