

The Parables of Jesus

Lessons from the Master

Student Workbook

Book 2

Name: _____

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The Parables of Jesus

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The Parables of Jesus

Lesson 14

The Unjust Steward

*“Because of laziness the building decays,
And through idleness of hands the house leaks.”*

Ecclesiastes 10:18

Text:

Luke 16:1-13

“He also said to His disciples: ‘There was a certain rich man who had a steward, and an accusation was brought to him that this man was wasting his goods. So he called him and said to him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give me an account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward.’

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

“So he called every one of his master’s debtors to him, and said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ And he said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ So he said to him take your bill and sit down quickly and write fifty.’ Then he said to another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ So he said, ‘A hundred measures of wheat.’ And he said to him, ‘Take your bill, and write eighty.’

“So the master commended the unjust steward because he had dealt shrewdly. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light. And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when it fails they may receive you into an everlasting home. He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much. Therefore if you have not been faithful in unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in another man’s, who will give you what is your own?

“No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.”

The Context:

This parable is recorded only in the Gospel of Luke and follows one of the most well known of all parables: the Prodigal Son. This is also one of the more difficult parables to interpret.

- In the preceding parable, the younger son thought that money would make him happy. The older son, even though he stayed home, was also covetous of what was given to the prodigal though the blessings he enjoyed were just as great. This

was the attitude of the Pharisees: they “stayed home” and kept God’s commands but their hearts were in the world. Lost in their self-righteousness, they had no love or mercy for sinners who returned home.

The main characters in this parable are:

- A steward: “One who has charge of the affairs of a family or household; whose duty it is to provide for the family, to purchase provisions... this is an office of trust and confidence. It affords great opportunity for dishonesty and waste, and for embezzling property. The master’s eye cannot always be on the steward, and he may therefore squander the property, or hoard it up for his own use.⁵
- A certain rich man who had put the steward in charge of managing his property and goods.

The Message:

- To help with the interpretation, keep in mind the last verse: “... *You cannot serve God and mammon.*” Woven throughout this parable, Christ was warning His disciples about the dangers of riches and covetousness.
- Another important message is to never stop trying... even when there seems to be no hope. This wicked servant determined to try something. We can learn from this attitude of action. We can choose inaction and hope things somehow work out for us or we can choose action and trust God to help us. Which is more pleasing to God? (Ecclesiastes 11:6).

Commentary:

This is a difficult parable to interpret for many reasons but primarily why would Christ use such a lazy and corrupt person as an example for us to learn from? What can we, God’s children, learn from such a man:

- He was a lazy servant
- He squandered his master’s goods
- He was too lazy to work
- He was too proud to beg
- But he was good at scheming

He schemed not to be taken back by his master (he had already written that off) but schemed to find a way to fall into the good graces of his master’s debtors so that “*when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses.*”

Because he was willing to try something, he ended up saving his job. It worked out better than he had planned. It turned out that his master was impressed with his shrewdness and took him back (although now he was probably going to keep a very close eye on him). He was a lazy and terrible servant but Christ says we can learn from “*the sons of this world*”

- Are we as diligent as those in this world when it comes to taking care of our business? The “sons of this world” work day and night to promote themselves and their schemes. Are we this diligent in promoting our Lord and Savior to a lost and dying world?

- Are our spiritual pursuits equal or greater to our earthly pursuits? In other words, do we spend as much effort doing God’s work as we do pursuing earthly interests such as: sports, recreation, entertainment, work? We may be good at scheming to find a way to go to a sporting event or concert that we badly want to attend but easily let other things come in the way of assembling with the church, studying our Bibles, or visiting a brother or sister.

In verse 9 we find these words of admonition from Jesus:

“And I say to you make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home.” (vs. 9). Make friends so that you will have a place to go. The steward was scheming to find his next job or home *“I have resolved what to do that when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses”* (verse 4). Jesus is telling us to do the same. Work here but do not trust in your money *“unrighteous mammon”* or earthly things for they will eventually fail. Rather, lay up treasures in heaven. Make friends in heaven so that when this world fails you may be *“received into an everlasting home.”*

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

Questions for Discussion:

1. What can we learn from this lazy and unjust steward?
2. What quality or qualities of this man, did Christ want His disciples to imitate?
3. What are your thoughts on verse 3 *“...I cannot dig; I am ashamed to beg.”*?
4. How would you describe the overall character of this man?

5. Specifically, what action did this man take to try to provide for his future? Did it work?

6. Consider verses 10-12. How do you interpret these verses? Might they also relate to the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30)?

7. Consider Ecclesiastes 11:6. Did the action this unjust steward took achieve what he had expected or something else?

So What?

What can you take away from this parable to help you as a child of God today? Don't imitate this man's laziness and corruptness but determine to be action-oriented and trust God to help you. Amazing things can happen when we stay busy and trust God.

The Parables of Jesus

Lesson 15

The Persistent Widow

*“Are you weary, are you heavy-hearted?
Tell it to Jesus, tell it to Jesus.
Are you grieving over joys departed?
Tell it to Jesus alone”*

Hymn: Tell it to Jesus
Lyrics by: Jeremiah Earnes Rankin

Lesson Goal:

To better understand the importance of knowing when to be patient and when to be persistent.

Text:

Luke 18:1-8

“Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart, saying: ‘There was a certain judge who did not fear God nor regard man. Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying ‘Get justice for me from my adversary.’ And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, ‘Though I do not fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.’ Then the Lord said, ‘Hear what the unjust judge said. And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?’”

The Context:

In chapter 17, Jesus has just concluded with a description of the coming of His kingdom. He then tells them this parable that they “*not lose heart.*” There will be difficult days ahead and their faith may be shaken but God will never forsake them.

The Message:

- There may be times when we become discouraged and our prayers seem to go unanswered but we should never “lose heart.” God knows our problems and He hears our prayers and He will provide His answer in His time.
- We need to be persistent so that when Christ returns He will find us among the faithful on earth.

Commentary:

“A judge who did not fear God nor regard man.”

- God told the people to appoint judges in every town *“and they shall judge the people with just judgment”* (Deuteronomy 16:18). To learn more about these types of judges, see also: Exodus 18:21-26; Deuteronomy 19:17.
 - Here is a man in authority who is very much focused on himself. He does not look to God to help him with his judgments that he be fair to those who come before him and he has no regard for the individual either. He is not inclined to show concern or compassion.

“Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him...”

- It is significant that the person pleading for justice was a widow. Widows in that day and age were most vulnerable and often were poor since they had no husband to provide for them. It was most common for the women not to be skilled in labor and they depended on their husband for their physical welfare. There certainly were exceptions (for example, Lydia) but the fact that a widow came to the judge rather than a man was significant (see also: James 1:27; 1 Timothy 4:3-10).

“Get justice for me from my adversary.”

- She had been wronged and was seeking justice. As instructed by the law she brought her case before the local judge.

“And he would not for a while...”

- This reaction fit perfectly with his character. He had no sense of justice (certainly he was the wrong man to be a judge) and he had no compassion for the poor and downtrodden in society. His reaction might have been “don’t’ trouble me with your trivial requests.” But more likely, he just ignored her and paid her no mind.

However, something caused him to change his mind and this is the key point of the parable. This woman (poor and insignificant in the eyes of the judge) refused to go away. SHE WAS DETERMINED TO BE HEARD. So, the judge heard her and ruled in her favor not because he felt compassion for her or not because he wanted justice to be served. He vindicated her so that she would go away. *“I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.”* Selfish to the end, the judge heard her so that he could have peace.

Now, if such a cruel and unjust judge will hear the pleas of the poor and outcasts if they are persistent, how much more will our Heavenly Father hear our requests if we faint not? There is a remarkable scene described in Revelation 6:9-10: *“When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, ‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’”* These were martyrs who had been slain because of their faith and who would not deny Christ. Like the widow in this parable, they cry out for justice but (unlike the widow’s judge) the one they come to for help is *“holy and true.”* He is the righteous judge, Lord God Almighty. In verse 11, He provides comfort to them and assures them that He will see that justice is served.

At the end of this parable (verse 8), Jesus says that God will hear the cries of His children and will *“avenge them speedily.”* The question is not will God help us. The question is

will we eventually lose heart and stop relying on Him? “...when the Son of Man comes will He really find faith on the earth?”

We must believe that God will help us and we must be patient but persistent.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What do you believe is the most important lesson we can learn from this parable?
2. Why did the judge finally hear the widow’s case?
3. What quality did the widow have that Jesus is teaching us to have also?
4. Explain verse 7. How does God “avenge His own elect?” You might also look at Revelation 6:10.
5. What warning does Christ give in the final verse of this parable (verse 8)?

So What?

In verse 1 of Luke 18, it says that Christ spoke this parable so that “*men always out to pray and not lose heart.*” There is a real danger that we might just give up on our faith. Christ is urging us not to give up no matter how difficult the circumstances. He urges us to pray to our Father for help and He will provide. The answer may not be in the way we want or in the time we want but, we can be assured that God’s answer and His timing will be best for us. Keep the faith!

The Parables of Jesus

Lesson 16

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

*“...God resists the proud
But gives grace to the humble.”*

James 4:6

Lesson Goal:

To better understand the dangers of a prideful heart.

Text:

Luke 18:9-14

“Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men – extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’ And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.’”

The Context:

This parable, found only in the gospel of Luke, immediately follows the parable of the persistent widow. Christ concluded the previous parable with the question “*when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?*” Now He tells a parable about those who put on a show of faith but, in reality, trusted only in themselves.

The Message:

- What is my attitude toward God and toward other people?
- What is my attitude when I approach God in prayer?

Commentary:

Who was a Pharisee? Following are some quotes from William Barclay’s book *The Parables of Jesus*.

- “The name ‘Pharisee’ literally means ‘separated one.’ The Jewish scribes and Rabbis, beginning from the great principles of the Ten Commandments, had amplified the Jewish law until it included tens of thousands of petty regulations covering every moment and every action in life; and they considered that the keeping of these regulations was a matter of life and death.”⁴
 - “As an example let us take the regulations governing the washing of hands. To eat food with unwashed hands was a grave sin leading to

poverty and disaster. In general this is obviously a good healthy rule. But the hands had to be washed in a certain way. Water had to be specially kept. At least as much as a quarter of a log must be used, that is, enough to fill one and a half egg-shells. The water was poured over both hands and each hand was cleansed by rubbing it with the fist of the other. Finally the hands were held up and the water must run the length of the wrist and then run off. Then the whole business was repeated but this time the hands were held pointing down, and the water must run down to the finger tips. If anything was altered or omitted it was a deadly sin.”⁴

- “No ordinary mortal could continue within the everyday business of life and observe all these regulations. So the Pharisees *separated* themselves off from the ordinary activities of life. But not only did they separate themselves off from the ordinary business of life; they cut themselves off from their fellow men as well. They considered it a matter of defilement to talk to, to do business with, to receive hospitality from or give hospitality to anyone who did not observe the law as meticulously as themselves. The almost inevitable consequence was that they acquired a haughty disdain for every ordinary person.”⁴

Who was a Publican or Tax Collector? (these quotes are also from the book *The Parables of Jesus* by William Barclay)

- “Rome had a curious method of collecting taxes. Generally speaking she assessed an area at a certain sum and then let out the right to collect its taxes to the highest bidder. So long as the contractor paid to Rome the sum agreed he was free to keep the rest to himself. And since there was no ready means of spreading the information in the days before newspapers, radio or television, few knew how much they were compelled to pay and the tax collector could make a handsome profit.”⁴
 - “There were three taxes which every man must pay- a toll tax for the privilege of existing, a land tax which consisted of one tenth of the produce of his ground, either in cash or in kind, and income tax which was one per cent of his income.
 - “But the great sphere of opportunity for the tax collector was in what we would rather call custom duties. There was an import and an export tax on everything which came into and went out of the country. There was a tax for entering a walled town, a market or a harbour. There was a tax for crossing a bridge. There was a tax for using main roads, for possessing a cart, on each wheel of the cart and on the animal which drew it. The tax collectors could stop a man anywhere and make him undo his bundles and demand tax on this and that article in them. To make it worse, sometimes if the poor man could not pay, the tax collector would offer to advance him the money at a quite exorbitant rate of interest and so get him still further in his power”⁴
- “The crowning crime was that generally these tax collectors were Jews who had sold themselves into the hand of the Roman government in order to make profit out of the misfortune of their fellow countrymen. Public opinion classed together robbers, murderers, and tax collectors.”⁴

So here we have two men coming to the temple to pray. One took much pride in his faith and the strict practice of his faith. He separated himself from sinners and looked down on others who did not measure up to his standards. The other man who stood in the temple and prayed was, by his own admission, a sinner. As a tax collector his sins (though not specifically mentioned here) probably included: corruption, dishonesty, thievery and covetousness. Which of these two men do you think “*went down to his house justified?*” It was not the Pharisee. It was the tax collector. Why? The answer to that question is Christ’s lesson in this parable.

Christ answers the question in the latter part of verse fourteen: “... *for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*” Let’s look a little closer at the attitude of these two men.

The Pharisee thanked God (boasted) that he was not like other men:

- He was not an extortioner
- He was not unjust
- He was not an adulterer
- He was not as this tax collector
- He fasted twice a week
 - God only required one fast of the Jews. That was on the day of atonement (Leviticus 16:29-34; 23:27; Isaiah 58:5).
 - This is an example of the Pharisees adding to God’s Law. “*For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders...*” (Matthew 23:4). They did it for show and not out of a sincere heart. They wanted to be seen of men. Rather than elevating God, they elevated themselves.
 - Today we need to be careful that we not add to God’s commands for us.
- He tithed ALL that he had
- Notice the number of times the word “I” is used in his prayer. He spoke at length about himself and never once in his prayer praised God or asked God for mercy or strength. His only thanksgiving to God was for himself “*God I thank you that I am not like other men.*”

The Publican begged God for mercy.

- He was a sinner and he acknowledged his sins but he had come to the temple to pray. He knew what he needed to do and he was doing it. He was taking the first step in turning his life around and to get out of sin.
- His prayer was short and when he spoke about himself it was simply to beg for mercy.

The lesson of humility is consistent throughout God’s Word. It is easy to start thinking too highly of oneself. It is also very dangerous. We should always approach God with all humility and lowliness. We should have the attitude that Christ taught earlier in the book of Luke (17:10): “*So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say ‘We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.’*”

God looks at the heart

Questions for Discussion:

1. Consider Matthew 23:11-14
2. What was the attitude of the Pharisee when he prayed?
3. What was the attitude of the tax collector when he prayed?
4. Which attitude did Christ approve of and why?
5. In Proverbs 6:16-19, seven things are listed that God hates. The first on this list is “A proud (or haughty) look.” What are your thoughts about this? What is wrong with a proud look (attitude)?
6. The Pharisee appeared to be righteous. In fact, he made a point to display his “righteous acts.” However, outward appearances may be misleading. Read 1 Samuel 16:7 and make application to this parable.
7. How many fasts did God require of the Jewish people?

So What?

You may not think you have the attitude of this Pharisee when it comes to spiritual matters but it is easy to gradually start thinking too highly of oneself. You run the risk of thinking that you are granting God a favor by living righteously. You aren't! This week, read Luke 17:10 at least once a day. *“So likewise you, when you have done all those things which are commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.’”*

The Parables of Jesus

Lesson 17

The Minas/Talents

*“I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser.
Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit
He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit
He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.”*

John 15:1-2

Lesson Goal:

To better understand the importance of using our gifts to His glory.

Text:

Luke 19:11-27

Matthew 25:14-30

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability, and immediately he went on a journey.

Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. And likewise he who had received two gained two more also. But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord’s money.

After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them. So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying ‘Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.’ His lord said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.’ He also who had received two talents came and said, ‘Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.’ His lord said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.’ Then he who had received the one talent came and said, ‘Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours. ’But his lord answered and said to him, ‘You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed, so you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest. Therefore, take the talent from him, and give it to him who has ten talents. For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”

The Context:

In Matthew's gospel, this parable follows the parable of the five wise and five foolish virgins. As in that parable, the themes of being prepared and using what we have wisely, continue in the parable of the talents.

In Luke's gospel, this parable follows the occasion of Jesus inviting Himself to Zacchaeus' house. Zacchaeus was described as a "chief tax collector" and the crowd was outraged that he would enter the house of a sinner.

The Message:

We grow by doing and trying.

We die by sitting idle and doing nothing

We have been entrusted with a great treasure by God...nearly priceless. What are we doing with it?

Commentary:

A talent was a tremendous amount of money. One talent was equal to 6,000 denari and one denari was the equivalent of a day's labor. Therefore, one talent would equal roughly 20 years of labor and 5 talents would equal 100 years of wages. It is apparent that Christ was emphasizing the great value of the goods entrusted to the servants. It wasn't insignificant.

The parable is about a man who was traveling to a far country. While he was gone he did not want his goods to lie idle so he entrusted them to his servants so that the goods might increase in value.

STOP AND THINK!

What an honor for the master to entrust you with such treasure. What confidence and trust he placed in you.

Verse 15 – each was given a different number of talents (in Luke each servant was given the same amount: 10 minas). It says each was given talents "*according to his own ability.*" We don't all have the same abilities and we won't be held accountable for things we don't possess but we will be held to account for the abilities (great or small) that God has given us.

In Matthew's account, there were three servants and two different results.

- Two of the servants doubled the amount they were given and the master was pleased.
- One of the servants did nothing with his talent and returned it to the master with no increase. The master was furious with this servant. If he had wanted the treasure to simply lie dormant and not increase, there was no need for him to have given it to his servants. He could have simply left it in his estate and instructed his servants to guard it. The purpose for entrusting the treasure to the servants was so that it would be worth more when he returned.

We should note that it wasn't the number of talents that mattered. What mattered was what they did with what they had been given. Interestingly, the one unused talent was taken from the lazy servant and given to the servant who had five talents, then Christ said "*For to him who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away.*" Have you ever noticed (perhaps in your own life or in the lives of others), that the more you work for the Lord and fill your life (and time) with Godly things, the stronger you become, and the more knowledgeable you become? Your abilities (talents) increase. And the opposite is also true. If you tried to learn a foreign language (maybe French or Spanish) and you eventually learned a few words or phrases but if you didn't use the language or practice the language, eventually you forgot even the little that you had learned. So it is with the Christian. You may have learned many good lessons from your parents or other godly people but if you don't put into practice what you learned, eventually "*even what he has will be taken away.*" It's a scary thought but Christ is teaching us to be busy every day. Even though our abilities may seem small, through diligence and use, they can grow and blossom into things we never thought possible.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What is different between Matthew's account of this parable and Luke's account of this parable?
2. What is the value of 5 talents? What is the value of 10 minas? Why do you think Christ used examples with such great monetary value? Why not a day's wages or a week's wages?
3. Is some activity necessary for the physical body to be healthy? What happens to our bodies if they are not exercised? To be healthy, do our spirits also need exercise? What are some scriptures that support your answer?
4. Do we all have the same abilities? Is this a problem? What does Romans 12:3-8 have to say about this?
5. What did you learn from this parable? List at least two important things you learned.

So What?

How many talents have you been given? Take inventory. Over the years in your service to God, have you been able to increase your talents? Why or why not? When Christ returns to receive back the talents, will He be pleased?

The Parables of Jesus

Lesson 18

The Wicked Vinedressers

*“His hands were nail-scarred,
His side was riven,
He gave His life-blood for even me.”*

Hymn: What a Savior
By: Marvin P. Dalton

Lesson Goal:

To better understand the lessons found in this parable.

Text:

Matthew 21:33-46

Mark 12:1-12

Luke 20:9-19

“Then He began to tell the people this parable: ‘A certain man planted a vineyard, leased it to vinedressers, and went into a far country for a long time. Now at vintage-time he sent a servant to the vinedressers, that they might give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the vinedressers beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Again he sent another servant; and they beat him also, treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. And again he sent a third; and they wounded him also and cast him out.

Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my beloved son. Probably they will respect him, when they see him.’ But when the vinedressers saw him, they reasoned among themselves, saying, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, that the inheritance may be ours.’ So they cast him out of the vineyard and killed him. Therefore what will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those vinedressers and give the vineyard to others.’

‘And when they heard it they said, ‘Certainly not!’ The He looked at them and said, ‘What then is this that is written:

*The stone which the builders rejected
Has become the chief cornerstone?*

Whoever falls on that stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder.’ And the chief priests and the scribes that very hour sought to lay hands on Him, but they feared the people – for they knew He had spoken this parable against them.”

The Context:

In all three gospels, Christ’s authority is being questioned. *“Tell us, by what authority are You doing these things? Or who is he who gave You this authority”* (Luke 20:2)? Jesus answered them briefly by asking them a question (verses 3-8) and then told this parable. He responded to their question and then He gave them an example. The parable

was clearly understood by those who heard it because, after they heard it, they tried to kill Him. *“And they sought to lay hands on Him, but feared the multitude, for they knew He had spoken the parable against them, So they left Him and went away”* (Mark 12:12).

The Message:

We are simply workers in God’s vineyard. We need to be careful that we not start thinking too highly of ourselves (1 Corinthians 10:12) and forget that we are simply caretakers of what God has entrusted to us.

Commentary:

A certain man planted a vineyard and leased it to vinedressers (or tenant farmers) then he traveled to a far country.

- This man made a substantial investment in this vineyard. It included a winepress and a tower. He was the one who owned the vineyard. He simply leased it out to caretakers to tend it. They had no monetary investment in the vineyard. During the vintage-time, they would receive a portion of the proceeds from the sale of the grapes. If they had done a good job, the produce would be abundant and they would receive a good reward for their labor.

When the grapes were ripe and ready to be picked, the owner of the vineyard (who was still away in a far country) sent servants to receive the fruit of the vineyard and settle up with the vinedressers. Then something totally unexpected happened. The caretakers of the vineyard beat the master’s servants and sent them away empty handed. This happened repeatedly. The master sent servants and the caretakers either beat them or killed them. Mark (12:4) says they were treated shamefully.

STOP AND THINK!

Prior to Christ’s coming, God sent His prophets. How were they treated? See Matthew 23:30-31 and Hebrews 11:32b-40.

Finally, the owner of the vineyard sent his son. He reasoned that the evil vinedressers would certainly respect His son. *“But those vinedressers said among themselves, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’”* Rather than gladly serve their master and enjoy the fruit of their labors, these men became robbers and murderers. They had invested nothing but their time and labor; now their greed had turned them into monsters. They had been given much but they were not grateful; they wanted more.

When Christ was crucified, it was a crucifixion authorized and carried out by the Roman authorities. In fact, the Jews did not kill by crucifixion but more commonly by stoning. While it was the Romans who executed our Savior, it was the Jews who killed Him. Pilate, the Governor of the region, saw no fault in Jesus and tried several times to release Him. He could see that the charges against Christ had been trumped up. The Jews, who had been given a place of honor by God to care for His vineyard, were the very ones who turned on their master and killed His Son.

“Therefore what will the owner of the vineyard do to them?”

Questions for Discussion:

1. What did you learn from the parable of the wicked vinedressers?
2. In Luke 20, a question is asked at the end of verse 15 “...*Therefore, what will the owner of the vineyard do them?*” The answer follows in verses 16-18. What was the message for those hearing the parable at that time? What is the message for us today?
3. Are there other parables that refer to God’s people as workers in His vineyard or field? If so, do you find any similarities with this parable? Why the analogy of workers, caretakers, tenants, or vinedressers tending another man’s property or business?
4. In Luke 20:1 it was the chief priests, scribes, and elders who confronted Jesus and questioned His authority. What was their reaction after He told this parable (Luke 20:19)? Did they take action? Why or why not?
5. We may never be guilty of the horrendous acts of beating or killing God’s messengers but do we ever find ourselves resisting certain messages from God’s Word? Since punishment for our sins is not immediate, is there a tendency to become more bold in our disobedience?

So What?

As Christians, our Master has work for us to do in His vineyard. When He returns one day, will He find us bickering and complaining or diligently doing His work? It is easy to get off track. And, once off track, it is very difficult to get back on track. Resolve to be a faithful servant and not “crucify again” our Lord and Savior.

The Parables of Jesus

Lesson 19

The Hidden Treasure and The Pearl of Great Price

*“There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.”*

Shakespeare
from “Julius Caesar”

Lesson Goal:

To better understand the meanings of these parables of the true value of the Gospel of Christ and the gift of salvation.

Text:

Matthew 13:44-46

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

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

The Context:

These two parables are found only in the Gospel of Matthew and immediately follow the parable of the tares. The three parables immediately preceding this one in Matthew chapter 13 compared the kingdom of heaven to: tares among the good grain, a mustard seed, and leaven. In contrast to a small seed and a little leaven, Christ now describes the kingdom of heaven as things with great value. The kingdom of heaven starts small and grows and it is the most precious thing a person could possess.

The Message:

What would you give to be part of the kingdom of heaven?

The message of eternal life found in the gospel is so precious and valuable, we should sacrifice all that we have to obtain it. An old gospel preacher once said “if you miss heaven, you have just missed it all.”

Commentary:

These are two of the shortest parables but their message is extremely powerful. Few of us ever really grasp the value of the gift that is being offered to us. We are all busy with work and family and a thousand other things that keep us from really thinking seriously about our souls and salvation. It becomes another box to check every week. I recently

came across this little article which I think sums up very nicely the challenges we face daily.

THE WORK GOD HAS GIVEN US TO DO

The Lord has given every man his work. It is his business to do it, and the Devil's business to hinder him, if he can. As sure as God has given you a work to do, Satan will try to hinder you. He may present other things more promising. He may allure you by worldly prospects; he may assault you with slander; torment you with false accusations; set you to work to defend your character; employ pious persons to lie about you. You may have Pilate and Herod, Annas and Caiaphas against you, and Judas standing ready to sell you for 30 pieces of silver.

But, keep about your work. Do not flinch because the lion roars; do not stop to stone the Devil's dog. Do your work. Let liars lie, let the Devil do his worst; but see to it that nothing hinders you from fulfilling the work God has given you.

Keep about your work. Let your aim be steady as a star. Let the world brawl and bubble. You may be assaulted, wronged, insulted, slandered, wounded and neglected; you may be abused by foes, forsaken by friends and despised and rejected of men. But see to it with steadfast determination, with unfaltering zeal, that you pursue the great purpose of your life and object of your being, until at last you can say, "I have finished the work you gave me to do."

Author unknown

While salvation is a gift, it is also something we must seek and it will cost us something.

- Notice what Christ said in Matthew 7:7 *"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you."* Christ did not say to just wait and hope you receive what you need. He said to go after it; seek it. That's what the man in the second parable did and, when he found it, he sold all that he had to obtain this treasure. While, at first glance, this may seem extreme (selling all that you have), in fact it is consistent with what all of Christ's teachings. Notice Mark 10:28 *"Then Peter began to say to Him, 'See we have left all and followed You.'" and Matthew 10:37 "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it."* There is no price too steep to pay to be with Christ and gain heaven one day.
- Have you counted the cost?
 - *"For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it – lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish'? Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace. **So likewise,***

whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.
Luke 14: 28-33

Regarding the buried treasure in the first parable, I came across this quote from William Barclay in his book on the “Parables of Jesus”. It provides a little history or context around buried treasure during the time of Christ.

“To modern western ears this may sound a most unlikely story; but, as usual, Jesus was, in fact, telling of something that happened frequently in Palestine. Palestine was a land of wars. At any time a man’s back garden might become a battle-ground and his house looted; and so to hide one’s valuables in the ground was one of the commonest ways of preserving one’s property. The Rabbis indeed had a proverbial saying, ‘There is only one safe repository for money – the earth.’”⁴

What about the “pearl of great price” in the second parable? In this parable we are told that the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant. A merchant was a business person and this merchant dealt in precious pearls. To get a little perspective on pearls in the time of Christ, here is a paraphrase of a quote from William Barclay ...When Jesus spoke this parable pearls had a strange fascination for men. This fascination with pearls came from Egypt, and from the Egyptians the Romans had learned it. The curious thing was that the pearl was not desired so much for its money value; simply to look at a pearl and handle it was a source of delight. In the Jewish Talmud the pearl is often spoken of as being beyond price. The pearl merchants scoured the world for really beautiful specimens...⁴ It appears that it was common for people at that time to highly value pearls so Jesus used this as an opportunity to teach about the kingdom of heaven. There is in fact a “pearl” so precious and beautiful that one would sell everything else in order to buy this one pearl. Only one thing could be that beautiful and that is the kingdom of God.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What did you learn from the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price?
2. What are the differences between the two parables?
3. What are the similarities between the two parables?

4. In these parables, the men “*sold all that they had*” in order to obtain the object that represented the kingdom of heaven. Do we value things more if they cost us something? Can you think of any examples in your life?

5. What does it cost us to enter the kingdom of heaven?

So What?

Sometimes we want things handed to us but, in most cases, we value things more when we have to work for them. We understand that ultimately salvation is a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8) but he has placed conditions on us if we are to receive that gift (Matthew 7:21-23). Think about both the gift and the conditions this week. God is faithful with His promise and gift. How are you doing with satisfying His conditions?

The Parables of Jesus

Lesson 20

The Dragnet

“Then Jesus said to them, ‘Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men.’”

Mark 1:17

Lesson Goal:

To better understand the message of this parable.

Text:

Matthew 13:47-52

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind, which, when it was full, they drew to shore; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but threw the bad away. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just, and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.”

“Jesus said to them, ‘Have you understood all these things?’ They said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord.’ Then He said to them, ‘Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old.’”

The Context:

This parable is found only in Matthew and it immediately follows the parables of the hidden treasure and the the pearl of great price. It includes a description of the angels separating the good from the bad which is similar to the parable of the good grain and tares found earlier in this chapter in Matthew.

The Message:

Judgment is coming. The angels will separate the wicked from the just. There will be much regret on the part of the wicked who are *“cast into the furnace of fire.”*

Commentary:

Here is a parable about fishing. It was quite fitting to use a fishing parable since most likely Christ was still sitting in a boat on the shore of the Sea of Galilee (13:1). There may very well have been fishermen on the lake and, if not, the sight of fishermen using a dragnet was a very common sight. These were not recreational fishermen. They made their living fishing so they could not afford to use a fishing pole and catch one fish at a time. They used large nets and cast the net as far as they could in order to catch many fish in the net. Of course, when they pulled the net into the boat there were all kinds of fish trapped in the net. The net was in-discriminate. It caught up everything in its path. It was then the job of the fishermen to separate the “good from the bad.” From this everyday example, Christ drew a parallel to *“the kingdom of heaven.”* He said that *“the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea...”* Without getting too much into symbols (which may or may not apply), we see that the net, God’s Kingdom or

church is cast into the sea. In some of the apocalyptic writing the word “sea” is a representation of the “sea of mankind.” Just as a literal net is cast into a sea in order to catch fish, God’s kingdom is cast into the sea of mankind in order to offer salvation to all men. There is no doubt that God wants all to be saved (John 3:16) but it is just as apparent that all will not be saved (Matthew 7:21-23). In the parable of the tares, both the good grain and the tares were gathered together. Then Christ explained “*The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth*”(13:41-42) This is repeated almost word for word in the parable of the Dragnet.

Jesus concludes His teaching with a question. “*Have you understood all these things?*” A good teacher (and Christ was the best) wants to know if their students are not only hearing but understanding the message. Christ had just taught them 7 parables about the kingdom of heaven: the sower, the tares among the grain, the mustard seed, the leaven, the hidden treasure, the pearl of great price, and the dragnet. It appears these parables were taught immediately in succession. When the people answered that yes, they understood what He was teaching them, He gave them one final instruction.

“Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old.”

Since they had answered that they understood His teaching, Christ now referred to them as Scribes. Since they answered that they understood the teachings of the kingdom of heaven, they were now to go forth and share this treasure with others. Like a keeper of a house who brings out his treasures, so were Christ’s disciples. The treasure of the kingdom of heaven was not to be hidden or kept in secret. It was to be shared and proclaimed openly.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What is the message of the parable of the dragnet?
2. How is the kingdom of heaven like a dragnet?
3. In the parable, are some of the fish good and some bad? What is done with the good and the bad fish? Why?
4. What similarities do you see between the parable of the dragnet and the parable of the tares?

5. What were Christ's disciples instructed to do with their knowledge of the kingdom of heaven?

So What?

Do you understand the lessons found in the parables about the kingdom of heaven? What are you doing to share this treasure with others?

The Parables of Jesus

Lesson 21

The Lost Sheep

*“All we like sheep have gone astray;
We have turned, every one, to his own way...”*

Isaiah 53:6

Lesson Goal:

To better understand the lessons of seeking the lost and protecting the innocent ones from harm.

Text:

Matthew 18:10-14

“Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven. For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost. What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying? And if he should find it, assuredly, I say to you, he rejoices more over that sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.”

The Context:

This entire chapter is about humility, innocence and forgiveness.

- Verses 1-5 – Who is the greatest?
 - One who humbles himself as a little child
- Verses 6-9 – Woe to the one who causes a babe in Christ to sin
- Verses 10-14 – Christ came to save sinners. We dare not despise (or mistreat) any of God’s children but especially not the weak. As the loving Shepherd, Jesus cares for His own and expects that we will too.
- Verses 15-20 – Then what should I do if a brother sins against me?
- Verses 21-35 – What should be our attitude toward forgiveness?

The Message:

- Christ came to save sinners. *“For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost.”*
- We dare not despise (or mistreat) any of God’s children but especially not the weak. *“Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones...”*
- As the loving Shepherd, Jesus cares for His own and expects that we will too. *“...I say to you, he rejoices more over that sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. Even so it is not the will of the Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.”*

Commentary:

“Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones.” Who are the “little ones” we are not to despise or treat carelessly? Earlier in this chapter (verses 2 & 3), when asked who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, Christ called a little child to His disciples. We don’t know the age of this child but it is safe to assume the child was in the age of innocence. The child was not likely an infant because the scriptures say that Jesus called to the child (or beckoned them) and the child came to Him but the child was a “little child.” Once again, any attempt at assigning an exact age is pure conjecture but most likely the child would be in the range of 4 to 8 years... old enough to hear and respond but still young and innocent to the ways of sin. What are some of the characteristics of such a child?

- They are humble.
 - Everyone around them is larger, knows more words, and have authority over the child.
- They are teachable.
 - Most young children are like sponges. They soak up every word they hear. They are eager to learn and generally are eager to please their parents.
- They are pure.
 - Sinful thoughts have yet to enter their mind. They may get angry but it is over some immediate issue about not getting their way over a toy or food or nap or?
- They are forgiving.
 - They may argue and fight with their siblings or friends one moment but the next moment all is forgotten and they are best friends again.

Christ teaches His disciples that greatness comes from possessing these qualities. If you want to be great in the kingdom of heaven then you will be: humble, and teachable, and pure, and forgiving. *“Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”*

Continuing His teaching on becoming like little children, Christ states (verse 6) *“But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin...”* This could be referring still to the innocent child and in some way placing a stumbling block before the child so that when the child reaches an age of knowing right and wrong, they choose a sinful life. Woe to the one who would corrupt a child. Another view of Christ’s teaching is that He talking about a “little one” in the kingdom of heaven, the church. This teaching would be more immediate (than causing a child to sin sometime in the future) and would address the issue of pride and arrogance which seemed to be behind the original question of “who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Be careful you who think you are so strong and great in the church that you not look down on the weaker or less mature (children) members. Perhaps they are new Christians and still struggling with their faith and leaving behind the pleasures of the world. *“Woe to that man by whom the offense comes.”*

This second interpretation might also fit better with Christ’s parable about the lost sheep and the lessons that immediately follow in this chapter: how do I deal with a brother who has sinned against me and what should be my attitude toward forgiving others?

5. What can we, as Christians, learn from children?

So What?

Make a point to learn something from a child. They may not have book knowledge (facts) or knowledge about the world (many things they have yet to experience) but they possess qualities that we all need and many of us have lost. Rediscover the wisdom, purity, and joy of childhood.

The Parables of Jesus

Lesson 22

The Unforgiving Servant

*“He paid a debt He did not owe.
I owed a debt I could not pay...”*

Hymn: He Paid a Debt
Anonymous

Lesson Goal:

To better understand the messages found this parable about forgiveness.

Text:

Matthew 18:21-35

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

“Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, ‘Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’ Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt.

“But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, ‘Pay me what you owe!’ So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’ And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt.

“So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?’ And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him.

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

The Context:

This parable is found only in the Gospel of Matthew and is the powerful conclusion to this beautiful chapter. As was mentioned in lesson 21, this entire chapter is about humility, innocence and forgiveness.

- Verses 1-5 – Who is the greatest?
 - One who humbles himself as a little child
- Verses 6-9 – Woe to the one who causes a babe in Christ to sin
- Verses 10-14 – Christ came to save sinners. We dare not despise (or mistreat) any of God’s children but especially not the weak. As the loving Shepherd, Jesus cares for His own and expects that we will too.
- Verses 15-20 – Then what should I do if a brother sins against me?
- Verses 21-35 – What should be our attitude toward forgiveness?

The Message:

We have been forgiven of a very great debt. Shouldn’t we, in turn, be willing to forgive one another of much smaller debts? In fact, our own salvation is dependent on our willingness to freely and completely forgive others.

Commentary:

This parable was prompted by Peter’s question about how often he should forgive his brother. In verses 15-20, Jesus has just told His disciples what to do if a brother sins against them. It appears that Peter clearly understands the instructions but surely there must be a limit to this type of grace so he suggests a number sufficiently large that should accommodate the sinning brother and impress Christ. Of course, Christ is not impressed because Peter has missed the point. God’s grace has no limit. And we should thank Him everyday for that. Likewise, our grace should not have a limit. We should not keep track of offenses. We should forgive and move on. Then, to illustrate the point, Christ tells a parable.

“The kingdom of heaven is like...”

- A king who is settling accounts with his servants. The king has entrusted certain duties and money to his servants and now they must settle up. What have they done with the king’s money?

“...one was brought to him who owned him ten thousand talents.”

- I looked at several sources to determine the value of a talent and then tried to calculate the value of ten thousand talents. It is an astronomical number; nearly impossible to comprehend (remember that in the parable of the talents one servant was given five talents and that was a very large amount of money). Once I stopped trying to calculate the size of the debt, I realized that was the point: it is beyond calculation and comprehension. The debt this servant owed and the debt we owe to God is more than we could ever repay.

So, the servant begs the king for mercy and the king shows mercy to his servant. This was purely an act of kindness and forgiveness on the part of the king. He had every right to demand that the servant pay all that he owed but instead he chose to forgive. Notice that there were no conditions placed on this forgiveness. It was as though the debt had

never existed. The servant was free and clear. With this great weight lifted from his shoulders, one would think he would be happy and cheerful and greet everyone with smiles and kindness. He does not. He, who had been forgiven of a debt that he could not possibly repay went out and demanded that a fellow servant immediately pay him a comparatively small debt. He who had received mercy, showed no mercy.

STOP AND THINK!

What has just happened? Mercy was extended without conditions and mercy was received. Actually, there was one implied condition for the servant to enjoy the mercy: he had to show mercy himself. Perhaps we can think of this as a relay race. In a relay race, the runners pass a baton. In our example, the baton is mercy. The first runner receives the baton (mercy) from God (we all are saved by the grace of God) with the expectation that he will pass the baton (mercy) on to the next runner. But the runner refuses to pass the baton (mercy) on to the next person and is disqualified. He may be the fastest runner in the world but a relay is a team sport. So it is in the life of a christian and in the church. If I am not willing to forgive my brothers and sisters then I will be disqualified and the mercy that was extended to me will be taken away.

When the king learned of his servant's behavior, he was furious. *"You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?"*

Extending forgiveness to others is a very serious matter. Our soul's eternal destination depends on it. Too many families, marriages, and churches have split because one or more parties were unwilling to forgive. We must swallow our pride or whatever it is that is keeping us from saying (from the heart) those precious words: "I forgive you."

Questions for Discussion:

1. What was Christ's answer to Peter's question about how often he should forgive his brother? (verses 21-22)
2. In verse 23, what is the king doing with his servants? Is there a time when we too much stand before the king and give an account? (see Revelation 20:12)
3. What was the situation with the servant described in verses 24-26?
4. What did the master of the servant do in verse 27?

5. What did the servant do in verses 28-30?

6. What was the result of the servant's actions? (verses 29-34)

7. What is the warning for us today found in verse 35?

8. Is forgiveness easy or hard? Why?

9. How will you apply this parable in your life?

10. For extra credit, do some research and determine the value of ten thousand talents either in today's currency or in the equivalent number of days of labor.

So What?

Look into your heart. Are you holding any grudges? Have you not completely forgiven a brother or sister of something they said or did? Resolve to make that right today. There are things in life that are beyond our control but forgiving others is a choice we can (and must) make.

The Parables of Jesus

Lesson 23

The Workers in the Vineyard

“To the work, to the work we are servants of God”

Hymn: To the Work
By: Frances J. Crosby

Lesson Goal:

To better understand the message of this parable and the dangers of covetousness.

Text:

Matthew 20:1-16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right, I will give you.’ So they went. Again he went out about the sixth and ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.’

“So when the evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, ‘Call the laborers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.’ And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, saying, ‘These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.’ But he answered one of them and said, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?’

“So the last will be first, and the first last.”

The Context:

In chapter 19, Jesus had just finished speaking about the dangers of riches. He advised a rich young man to “go sell what you have and give to the poor...” Now, in this parable, He continues to teach about the dangers of a covetous heart but his example is not about the rich but about common people, the daily laborers. Though not rich, they too can be guilty of the sin of covetousness.

The Message:

- Beware of envy and covetousness; be happy when others receive good things.
- Do not compare ourselves, our work, our achievements, etc with others. Our work is for the master. He is the one we must please and He is the one who will reward us fairly.

Commentary:

This is a parable about day workers. They were not permanent employees of the landowner but when vintage time came, they were hired by the day or hour to harvest the grapes. The owner of the vineyard went out first thing in the morning to hire workers for that day “...*who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.*” As the day wore on, he determined that he needed more workers so he went out four more times to hire laborers. He went out about the third hour (9:00AM), and again about the sixth hour (12:00 NOON) and the ninth hour (3:00PM) and finally he hired more laborers at the eleventh hour (5:00PM). We are not told why he kept looking for more workers. Perhaps the harvest was going so well he wanted it completed that day and needed more help. Or perhaps the first workers were not getting as much done as he had hoped so he chose to provide them with additional workers. Whatever the reason, he kept returning to the marketplace, or city square, to see if more workers were available. Of particular interest are the wages of these workers:

- The workers hired first thing in the morning agreed to work for a denarius a day.
- The workers hired later in the day were told by the landowner that he would pay them “what was right.” He would determine what was fair and right and they agreed to this.

At the end of the day, there were those who had labored for twelve hours, while some had labored for nine hours, some six hours, some three hours, and finally some had only labored for one hour. They were all paid the same amount: a denarius. The workers who had worked all day long thought this was very unfair to them. After all, they had labored all day long, while others (who were receiving the same pay) and spent much less time laboring in the vineyard. However, they had conveniently forgotten that they had agreed to work for a denarius a day and, by all indications were happy to work for this wage. In fact, if they had been the first to receive their pay, they would have gone happily on their way not knowing that the others were paid the same wage. Their complaint was not with their wage but with the wages of others. This was their sin. They were envious of the good fortune of others but, as the owner of the vineyard explained “*Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things?*”

Let’s consider this parable in terms of the kingdom of heaven, the church. Jesus began this parable by saying that “*the kingdom of heaven is like...*” As laborers in God’s kingdom, His church, we are working for the Master. It is He who we must please. We all have different gifts, talents, and abilities (Romans 12:3-8). We are not to compare ourselves to one another. We are to honor and prefer one another. When our work on earth is done, our Master will pay each of us “what is right.”

When Jesus said to the thief on the cross “*today you will be with me in paradise*” (Luke 23:43). He chose to give salvation to a man who had not labored one hour in Christ’s

vineyard. Was this right? Of course it was because salvation was Christ's to give to whomever He pleased. *"Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things?"*

Another thought we should consider is that Christ may also be referring to the Gentiles as the workers who were hired in the eleventh hour but received the same pay as those who worked all day. The Jews took great pride in the fact that they were God's chosen people and indeed this was truly a great honor that through Abraham's seed all nations would be blessed (the Savior would come through the lineage of Abraham, the children of Israel). However, this blessing did not exclude other people from receiving blessings too. When Peter was told to go and preach the Gospel to Cornelius (a Gentile), his eyes were opened and he said *"In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him"* (Acts 10:34-35). Many of the self-righteous Jews found this to be a hard teaching but it is a teaching that Christ taught more than once because they needed to hear it. Recall in lesson 11, the parable of the great supper, that those first invited to the feast rejected the invitation, so the master invited the outcasts, the poor, the maimed and the blind. When there was still room, he invited everyone *"Go out into the highways and hedges and compel them to come in"* (this would include the Gentiles).

Christ concludes this parable by saying *"So the last will be first and the first last."* These are the same words He used to introduce the parable (19:30) *"But many who are first will be last, and the last first."* The self-righteous Jews would no longer be first. *"He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God..."* (John 1:11-12).

Questions for Discussion:

1. What lessons did you learn from this parable?
2. Do you think it was fair that those who only worked one hour received the same pay as those who had worked twelve hours? Why or why not?
3. Would you be happy if others, who worked much less than you, received the same pay? Why or why not?
4. What was Christ teaching the Jews (particularly the Pharisees) in this parable?

5. What is Christ teaching us today in this parable?

6. Christ said this parable was about the kingdom of heaven (His church). In what ways do you see this applying to us in the church?

7. In the kingdom of heaven, who might the workers be who were hired in the third, sixth, ninth, and eleventh hours?

So What?

Be careful that you are not envious of what others have. Determine to do the best with what you have. Always give your best to the Master and “*whatever is right you will receive.*”

The Parables of Jesus

Lesson 24

The Two Sons

“Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice.”

1 Samuel 15:22

Lesson Goal:

To better understand obedience

Text:

Matthew 21:28-32

“But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, ‘Son, go, work today in my vineyard.’ He answered and said, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he regretted it and went. Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, ‘I go, sir,’ but he did not go.

“Which of the two did the will of his father?’ They said to Him, ‘The first.’ Jesus said to them, Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw it, you did not afterward relent and believe him.”

The Context:

Earlier in this chapter in Matthew, Jesus had entered the temple and physically driven out the money changers and those who sold doves. The next day, as He returned to the temple, the chief priests and elders challenged His authority to do these things. In return, He asked them a question about John the Baptist, which they declined to answer, and so He refused to answer their question. Instead, He spoke this short parable.

The Message:

Some make a big show of their spirituality but that’s all it is: a show (see Matthew 6:1-4). There is no substance and, when it comes time to work, they are nowhere to be found *“I go sir, but he did not go.”*

Others struggle with their faith but, in the end, they come through for their Lord.

Which is more pleasing to God?

Commentary:

In this parable, the first son answered his father hastily and later, as he thought more about it, he changed his mind. I don’t know about you, but if I had a nickel for every hasty decision and answer I gave, I would be a rich man. Too often we answer without giving serious thought to the question and so it seems to be with the first son. Here we have another parable about workers in a vineyard. The workers in this parable are not hired laborers but they are the sons of the owner of the vineyard. They had a vested interest in the success of the vineyard. If the vineyard prospered they would eat well and

live well. It was not only the livelihood of their father. It was their livelihood too. In addition, the vineyard would most likely one day be theirs as an inheritance when their father died. So the first son changed his mind and went to work in the vineyard.

The second son immediately answered “I go sir.” But he did not go. He too was quick to answer and he too later changed his mind. The difference is that this son proved to be lazy and untrustworthy. His answer to his father implied that he was going to work but that was not the case. He did no work in his father’s vineyard.

So Jesus asks the question, “*Which of the two did the will of his father?*” They answered Him “*the first.*” To whom did Jesus ask this rhetorical question? In the previous verses (23-27) he was having a conversation with the chief priests and elders so it stands to reason that this was simply a continuation of that conversation. “*But what do you think?*” And then He told this parable. At that point, the chief priests and elders (positions of authority with the Jews) answered Him that the first son had done his father’s will. They answered correctly and, in so doing, condemned themselves. They were the ones proudly proclaiming that they were busy with God’s work but in fact they were not. “*...The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. But all their works they do to be seen by men...*” (Matthew 23:1-5).

Just in case, they missed the point of the parable, Christ made direct application to them in verses 31 and 32. The sinners and outcasts of society believed John the Baptist and changed their answer from “no” to “yes.” But these leaders of the Jews would not change. “*and when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.*” Once again, their pride and arrogance kept them from going to work in God’s vineyard and entering His kingdom.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Who were challenging Jesus in Matthew 21:23?
2. How did Jesus answer them? (Matthew 21:24-27)
3. What lesson(s) did you learn from the parable of the two sons?
4. What was the response of the first son to his father’s request?

5. What was the response of the second son to his father's request?

6. Which of the two sons did the will of his father?

7. What lesson was Jesus teaching those who heard this parable?

8. What lesson is Jesus teaching us today through this parable?

So What?

Talking about doing God's work is easy. Doing God's work is not easy. What are some examples of God's work that you can do? What is keeping you from doing His work?

The Parables of Jesus

Lesson 25

The Wise and the Foolish Virgins

*"When Jesus comes to reward His servants,
Whether it be noon or night,
Faithful to Him, will He find us watching,
With our lamps all trimmed and bright?"*

Hymn: Will Jesus Find Us Watching?
By: Frances J. Crosby

Lesson Goal:

To better understand the lessons in the parable about being prepared.

Text:

Matthew 25:1-13

"Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish. Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept.

"And at midnight a cry was heard: 'Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!' Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise answered, saying, 'No, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.' And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut.

"Afterward the other virgins came also, saying 'Lord, Lord, open to us!' But he answered and said, 'Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.'

"Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming."

The Context:

In the previous chapter (Matthew 24) Christ was talking about His second coming. *"Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."* He then told a parable about a faithful servant and an evil servant (lesson ten in our series) and then tells this parable about a wedding and ten young girls waiting to greet the bridegroom.

The Message:

Be ready. Be prepared. Just as certain as Christ left this world in clouds He will return in like manner (Acts 1:9-11). When He returns it will be for those who are ready and prepared for Him. Heaven is a prepared place for a prepared people.

Commentary

This is another parable about the kingdom of heaven. In this parable, which is about being ready when Christ (the bridegroom) comes, the main characters are ten young girls. Five were prepared and five were not. Since the marriage feast in Palestine during the time of Christ (and still common in some eastern countries today) was quite different than the wedding ceremonies in North America, I thought I would provide some background information which might be helpful as we study this parable.

From William Barclay “The Parables of Jesus”

“The picture of the girls waiting for the bridegroom was the kind of thing that happened and still happens. If the bridegroom came from any distance there was no saying when he would come and since he was a supremely honoured guest, not to welcome him when he did come was a serious breach of manners...

“So the bridegroom comes unexpectedly, and sometimes in the middle of the night; it was true that he is required by public opinion to send a man along the street to shout, ‘Behold! The bridegroom is coming!’ but that may happen at any time, so the bridal party have to be ready to go out into the street to meet him whenever he chooses to come... Other important points are that no one is allowed in the streets after dark without a lighted lamp, and also that, when the bridegroom has once arrived, and the door has been shut, late-comers to the ceremony are not admitted.”⁴

Hopefully that gives us a little better understanding of what Christ was referencing in this parable. The bridegroom was coming. He could come at any time and for him to come sometime late into the night was not unheard of. After dark, a lamp was required and entry into the wedding ceremony was not allowed once the doors were shut. What is important to note is that all of this information was known well in advance. No one who had intended to attend the wedding would have been surprised about any of this. It was a common occurrence. So why weren’t five of the girls prepared? Were they thinking that the bridegroom would come right away? Were they thinking that they could run quickly and buy more oil if needed? Were they thinking that they could borrow someone else’s oil? Or were they just not thinking?

They were not prepared. They wanted to be part of the wedding and the celebration but they had done very little to prepare. We could say that they had done the minimum. If the bridegroom came right away and everything worked out then they would be okay. That’s no way to prepare for something that you absolutely, positively do not want to miss.

What was Christ teaching those who heard Him then and those of us who listen to Him today? We can be sure it was more than a Jewish wedding that was on His mind. He had just finished speaking about His second coming. What better way to finish that teaching than with a parable of a wedding feast they could all relate to? In fact, most if not all of

them, had been part of such a wedding ceremony. And, it is no stretch for us today to understand the message. His message is quite clear: He will return to receive His faithful to be with Him in Heaven forever. The question is not “will He return?” The question is: “will we be ready?” What will be our excuse if we are not prepared for His return? Will we scramble to buy or beg more oil? Will we blame others for our unpreparedness? Will we be on the outside when the doors are shut?

Or will our lamps be trimmed and glowing bright? It’s up to us. What if Christ returned today? Are we ready?

Questions for Discussion:

1. What lesson(s) did you learn from this parable?
2. Who is the bridegroom in this parable?
3. Who are the ten young girls (virgins) in this parable?
4. At midnight, when the bridegroom arrived, how many of the girls were prepared?
5. What prevented the other girls from being prepared?
6. In this parable, what was the consequence of not being prepared?

So What?

There is a story of a servant whose master went on a long journey and left him in charge of keeping his estate in perfect condition. Upon the master’s return, he would reward the servant for his work and diligence. Weeks became months and months turned into years but no sign of the master and no further word from him either. The neighbor’s chided the servant over how immaculate he kept the grounds and every part of the estate. They laughed and said “You must really think he will eventually return someday.” The servant calmly said “I expect my master will be returning today!”

The Parables of Jesus
Lesson 26
***Review of the Parables
And Lessons Learned***

*Consider the lilies of the field,
How they grow: they neither toil nor spin;
And yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory
Was not arrayed like one of these”*

Matthew 6:28-29

Lesson Goal:

To better understand the lessons contained in the parables.

Commentary

In these 25 lessons we have considered 27 of Christ's parables. They have ranged from parables about growing things (seeds), to catching things (fish in a dragnet), to vinedressers and landowners, to being prepared for a wedding. We have looked at lost sheep, a rich fool, and a good Samaritan. We have studied faithful servants and lazy servants and wicked servants, and unforgiving servants. We have considered the value of one lost sheep and one lost coin and one lost son. Through all of these lessons we have only started to scratch the surface of what Jesus taught. Each of us needs to reflect on what we have learned in the parables and, more importantly, what we will do with what we have learned. One lesson that jumps out at me is that I need to do a better job of teaching others by using everyday examples. I need to do less academic teaching about knowledge and more practical teaching about making the application of knowledge. I need to look at the flowers and the trees and the fields of grain and listen to God. I need to take time to listen to children more often. Each of us must make our own applications but Christ has left us with beautiful parables that afford us endless opportunities to learn and love and grow.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Which of the parables is your favorite? Why?
2. What are the most important lessons you have learned from this study of the parables of Jesus?
3. Why do you think Christ taught so often with parables?

4. How can a parable be more effective teaching than simply stating facts?

5. Do you think you could write a parable? Give it a try

So What?

Take what you have learned from our study of the parables of Jesus and determine to learn more. One goal could be to go over all of the lessons again and study them more deeply and/or with a fresh mind. Another goal could be to study the parables that we did not cover in these lessons.