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Preface

The warm response to *Wisdom of the Bible*, published on the Internet in January 1996, has encouraged me to attempt a much more difficult topic, the teachings of Jesus. I have tried to categorize and present the major themes that Jesus emphasized over and over to His disciples and to others who listened to His teachings. Nearly all this material is derived from the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

The teachings of Jesus are central to all branches of Christianity, but they do not fully represent the beliefs held by Christians. Countless theologians through the centuries have shaped those beliefs. Chief among these are St. Paul, whose letters appear in the New Testament, and St. Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430). The Orthodox Eastern Churches broke with the Roman Church in 1054 and have developed their own traditions, with emphasis on the writings of the Fathers of the Church. Since the Reformation in the 1500's, Protestant beliefs have been strongly influenced by Martin Luther (1483 – 1546), John Calvin (1509 – 1564) and the founders and theologians of the individual denominations. Meanwhile, Catholic beliefs have been influenced by the popes, the Catholic church's own internal reforms, and in recent times by the Second Vatican Council of 1962 – 1965.

I have not tried to present a complete set of Christian beliefs. Instead, I have attempted to categorize and present those things that Jesus, Himself, taught during His three years of earthly ministry. This is not a criticism or rejection of any church's doctrine, but it is an acknowledgment that, while Jesus and His teachings are absolutely central to all branches of Christianity, there are many different shades of interpretation and belief within the Christian community. If there is any intentional bias on my part, it is to concentrate on Jesus' advice for living our daily temporal and spiritual lives. I have not emphasized controversial topics such as the nature of Jesus' divinity, nature of salvation, etc., which are of more interest to theologians.

It is my hope that this work will be useful as an aid to understanding the ministry of Jesus, what He taught about our relationship with God and each other, and how He is guiding us toward eternal life in God's kingdom.

Throughout this work I have highlighted Jesus' words in red, in the tradition of many Bible editions.

I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of my wife, Helen, who edited this work and made many needed improvements.

Cliff Leitch
June 2000

Introduction - the Gospels

(Marshall, Lockyer)

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word have handed them down to us, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you might know the exact truth about the things you have been taught. (NAS, Luke 1:1-4)

Nearly everything we know about the life and ministry of Jesus comes from the Bible's four Gospel books – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The Gospels existed in oral tradition in the young Christian communities for some time before they were finally set in written form. As the eyewitnesses to the events of Jesus' life began to pass away in the latter part of the first century, it probably became more urgent that these events be preserved in writing.

The Bible's New Testament, which includes these four Gospels, was originally written entirely in Greek, the common language of the Mediterranean lands in Roman times. The first of the Gospels was probably Mark, written around 70 A.D., about 40 years after Jesus was crucified. Matthew and Luke were written between 80 and 90 A.D. Finally, The Gospel of John appeared in its final form around 95 A.D.

All four Gospels are anonymous in the sense that none includes the author's name. The traditional names – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – did not become associated with these writings until the second century. In the early centuries of Christianity, our four Gospels coexisted with a number of other Christian writings, many of which have not been preserved. Finally, the Synod of Carthage adopted the present twenty-seven New Testament books, including the four Gospels, as the canon of the New Testament in the year 397.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke are known as the *Synoptic* Gospels because they are strikingly similar. Bible scholars believe the authors of Matthew and Luke were aware of the Gospel of Mark and incorporated much of it in their own writings, along with material from another common source that has not been preserved, plus unique material of their own.

The Gospel of John is very much different from the Synoptic Gospels in the way it presents and interprets the events of Jesus' earthly life. The Synoptics portray Jesus traveling about and preaching in parables about the coming kingdom of God, while John presents a more spiritual and meditative picture of Jesus. Both John and the Synoptics present many of the same events of Jesus' life, including His trial, crucifixion, and resurrection.

Because of the differences among the Gospels, we are tempted to ask which, if any, is the correct portrayal of the events of Jesus' life. However, each of the four is a unique view of Jesus, drawn from different eyewitnesses and different traditions, and we are fortunate to have these four "windows" to see four views of these central events of Christianity.

Who is Jesus?

Jesus the Man

Although we number our years from the beginning of the Christian era, scholars believe Jesus was actually born between 6 and 4 B.C. Both Matthew and Luke recount Jesus' birth in the city of Bethlehem, in what is now southern Israel. Jesus was born into a Jewish family and remained faithful to Judaism all His life.

Jesus spent his youth and early adulthood in the city of Nazareth, in the land of Galilee. Almost nothing is known of this period of His life, except for the incident at the Temple told in Luke 2:41-51.

At about age 30, Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan by John the Baptist and began His public ministry. He selected 12 disciples who would carry on his ministry after Him. He traveled through the regions of Galilee, Samaria, and Judea, teaching in the synagogues and speaking to the crowds of people who followed wherever He went. He preached about the kingdom of God, repentance, and love for all people. The gospels tell how He healed the sick wherever He went and performed many other miracles.

Jesus' public ministry lasted about three years, and He found many followers among the Jews of Palestine. However, He had enemies, too. Jesus was very critical of the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of His time. He said they observed the *letter* of the Jewish law, but defiled its *spirit* by living lives of greed and sin. These religious leaders plotted to kill Jesus, and eventually forced the Roman governor, Pilate, to order His crucifixion on Friday, the eve of Passover, in about the year 30 A.D.

The Gospels tell that Jesus arose from the dead on the following Sunday, and He remained on Earth another 40 days before ascending into heaven. Jesus, Himself, said He was the Son of God, the Christ, the Messiah awaited by the Jews. He said His death and resurrection were all part of God's mysterious plan of salvation.

Jesus the Good Teacher

It is impossible to read the Gospels without getting a sense of the intensity and passion of Jesus' teachings. He spoke with great authority on spiritual matters, often leaving his detractors tongue-tied and looking foolish. Many of His teachings are disturbing and shake us out of our comfort and complacency. He spoke of loving God above all other things, caring about all other people as much as we care about ourselves, the coming kingdom of God and eternal life.

Jesus often spoke in parables, using common images of nature and agriculture, to deliver His spiritual messages. Many people, often including His disciples, were left baffled by the parables. Jesus explained His parables to his disciples in private, but many of the explanations have not been recorded in the Gospels.

With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them (the crowds that followed Him), as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything. (NIV, Mark 4:33-34)

Why did Jesus speak in parables? Why not just explain everything in plain language? Jesus, Himself, had this explanation:

When (Jesus) was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!" (NIV, Mark 4:10-12)

It seems that Jesus constructed His parables so only those who were pure of heart and receptive to His teachings could understand them. Jesus' enemies and the merely curious were left baffled. This seemingly harsh attitude may be Jesus' way of making His message available and inviting those who wish to understand and believe while never forcing anyone to know and accept His truths. If Jesus had spoken in plain language, the sheer power of His personality and message might have forced many to believe, even against their own will. By speaking in parables, Jesus made it possible to decline the invitation to understanding and commitment found in the parables. (Marshall, p. 869)

The parables serve a second purpose as well. How can you explain to someone an experience they have never had? How would you explain the beauty of a sunset to someone who had never seen one? The parables are skillfully painted mental "pictures" to help us understand the kingdom of God and other spiritual things we have never experienced ourselves. The **New Bible Dictionary** expresses it this way:

The parables are the appropriate form of communication for bringing to men the message of the kingdom, since their function is to jolt them into seeing things in a new way. They are a means of enlightenment and persuasion, intended to bring the hearers to the point of decision. Jesus, as it were, stands where his hearers stand, and uses imagery familiar to them to bring new and unfamiliar insights to them. (Marshall, p. 867)

Jesus the Savior

For those who have accepted the gift of faith, Jesus is much more than a historical figure and a good teacher. He is the Christ, the Savior, the Son of God, who came to Earth to redeem us from sin, establish His spiritual kingdom of God on Earth, and to offer the promise of eternal life. Although He is not now on Earth in bodily form, He is present with us through the power of the Holy Spirit. He is our guide and savior, the source of all our strength, who will lead us through this earthly life and into eternal life beyond. We can talk to Him in prayer. He speaks to us through the Bible and our consciences. He strengthens us with His love.

But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. (NIV, John 14:26-27)

Therefore go and make disciples in all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and then teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you; and be sure of this— that I am with you always, even to the end of the world. (TLB, Matthew 28:19-20)

God's Love for Mankind

"Are not five sparrows sold for two cents? And yet not one of them is forgotten before God. "Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear; you are of more value than many sparrows. (NAS, Luke 12:6-7)

Jesus often referred to God as "the Father" or "the heavenly Father." Our relationship to God is like the loving relationship between parent and child. Like a loving parent, God knows and cares deeply for each of us.

God is pure Spirit. We cannot see or touch Him. We can only dimly understand Him, but we can know Him through prayer, through the teachings of the Bible, and through our faith. In His teachings, Jesus presents a picture of a very loving God who wants everyone to be in harmony with Him. He is seeking to awaken a loving response in each of us. God knows and loves each of us personally, as parents know and love their children. God will give good things to those who ask:

"For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened. "Or what man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone? "Or if he shall ask for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him! (NAS, Matthew 7:8-11)

Like children, some of us return God's love, and some do not. Nevertheless, He loves all of us. God's gifts of love and salvation are freely offered to all, even to those who choose the path of wickedness.

.... He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (NIV, Matthew 5:45)

God is also merciful. He is always willing to forgive a truly repentant sinner and give him or her another chance. Even when we sin, we can be assured that God still loves us and seeks to bring us back into harmony with Him. However, it is up to us; we can accept or reject God's love. No matter how far our lives have drifted away from God, we must never be discouraged and think we are beyond hope!

"What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? "And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. "And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' "I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. (NAS, Luke 15:4-7)

One day Jesus was speaking with the Pharisee, Nicodemus, who was intrigued by Jesus' teaching but was more than a bit skeptical. Jesus told Nicodemus that God loved the people He had created so much that He sent Jesus to save them from the forces of evil and their own sinful ways. Those who put their trust in Jesus and His teachings could be born again spiritually and be part of God's spiritual kingdom. They could even defeat the power of death and attain eternal spiritual life! It was in this conversation with Nicodemus that Jesus spoke one of the most loved and quoted verses of the Bible:

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. "For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him. (NAS, John 3:16-17)

Related verses: Matthew 5:43-48, Matthew 6:25-30, Matthew 10:29-31, Luke 6:35-38, John 10:11-12.

The Kingdom of God

The kingdom of God is the very centerpiece of Jesus' teachings. Matthew speaks instead of the "kingdom of heaven." However, a number of passages in Matthew are virtually identical to those in Mark and Luke, except for the substitution of "kingdom of heaven" for "kingdom of God." Thus, the same reality is intended. The Gospel of John mentions the kingdom only twice but refers many times to the closely related concept of eternal life.

For hundreds of years, the Jews had been expecting the decisive intervention of God to restore the glory of Israel and defeat its enemies. When John the Baptist and then Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom was at hand, it was certainly understood in terms of this expectation. (Marshall, p. 647)

However, the kingdom initiated by Jesus is not the earthly kingdom that was widely inferred from the Old Testament prophecies. It is a spiritual kingdom that is now growing in the hearts of men and women, and it will find its fulfillment in the eventual sovereign rule of God and defeat of all evil. Those people who choose to belong to God's kingdom and serve Him, are those who are destined to inherit eternal life in God's presence.

Jesus often compared the kingdom of God to a seed planted in the hearts of men and women. Each of us has the seed of the kingdom within us, but it will grow only if we give it the proper "care and feeding." Jesus tells of this aspect of the kingdom in His famous Parable of the Sower:

... Jesus left the house and went down to the shore, where an immense crowd soon gathered. He got into a boat and taught from it while the people listened on the beach. He used many illustrations such as this one in his sermon: "A farmer was sowing grain in his fields. As he scattered the seed across the ground, some fell beside a path, and the birds came and ate it. And some fell on rocky soil where there was little depth of earth; the plants sprang up quickly enough in the shallow soil, but the hot sun soon scorched them and they withered and died, for they had so little root. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns choked out the tender blades. But some fell on good soil and produced a crop that was thirty, sixty, and even a hundred times as much as he had planted. (TLB, Matthew 13:1-8)

Jesus' disciples were often just as baffled by His parables as the huge crowds of people who came to hear Him preach. Later, when he was alone with His disciples, Jesus explained the Parable of the Sower to them in plain language:

"Now here is the explanation of the story I told about the farmer planting grain: The hard path where some of the seeds fell represents the heart of a person who hears the Good News about the Kingdom and doesn't understand it; then Satan comes and snatches away the seeds from his heart. The shallow, rocky soil represents the heart of a man who hears the message and receives it with real joy, but he doesn't have much depth in his life, and the seeds don't root very deeply, and after a while when trouble comes, or persecution begins because of his beliefs,

his enthusiasm fades, and he drops out. The ground covered with thistles represents a man who hears the message, but the cares of this life and his longing for money choke out God's Word, and he does less and less for God. The good ground represents the heart of a man who listens to the message and understands it and goes out and brings thirty, sixty, or even a hundred others into the Kingdom." (TLB, Matthew 13:18-23)

According to Jesus' explanation, three things are needed to belong to God's kingdom: understanding, commitment, and total devotion to God's Word above all else. Like the seed that falls on the hard path, a person who does not understand the Word and the Commandments will fall into the temptation of evil and lose sight of God's kingdom. Like the seed that falls on the shallow, rocky soil, a person lacking a strong commitment will drift away from faith because of peer pressure, inconvenience, embarrassment or persecution. Like the seed that falls among thistles, the faith of a person who is not totally devoted will succumb to the pettiness of worldly life and the desires for wealth, power and status.

The kingdom of heaven is not some far away place in a far away time that we can only dream about. It is here and now, among and within us. Jesus put it this way:

One day the Pharisees asked Jesus, "When will the Kingdom of God begin?" Jesus replied, "The Kingdom of God isn't ushered in with visible signs. You won't be able to say, 'It has begun here in this place or there in that part of the country.' For the Kingdom of God is within you." (TLB, Luke 17:20-21)

In the Parable of the Mustard Seed (Matthew 13:31-32), Jesus again compared the kingdom of heaven to a seed, this time a mustard seed. He said the mustard seed is the tiniest of all seeds, but it can grow into the largest of plants. In other words, the kingdom of heaven is like a tiny seed within each of us. We cannot see it or touch it and we are free to ignore it. However, if we choose to nurture it, it can grow into a powerful and wonderful force within us.

We are all God's children, and if we wish to be a part of His kingdom, we must humble ourselves before God like small children. We can enter *only* by the grace of God. God is not "required" to admit anyone because of faith proclaimed, church services attended, good deeds done, wise words spoken, or hardships suffered. We must come on God's terms, leaving our pride, arrogance, rebellion and self-centered desires behind:

... The disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, and said, "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. "Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (NAS, Matthew 18:1-4)

The Gospel of John tells of the kingdom of God in terms of a spiritual birth. Just as we were born and grow in the flesh, we must be "born" and grow in the Spirit. Speaking to the Pharisee Nicodemus, Jesus said we must be born again spiritually to enter the kingdom:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' (NAS, John 3:3-7)

Saul was a well-educated young man, a Jew and a Roman citizen. His Jewish heritage meant everything to Saul, and he saw the rise of Christianity as a threat to all that he held dear. He was present at the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and he became a fierce persecutor of the early Christians. He was determined to destroy the young church, and went from house to house arresting Christians and sending them to prison. (Lockyer, pp. 805-6)

Sometime around the year 34 A.D., while on the road to Damascus, Saul was blinded by a bright light:

He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. (NIV, Acts 9:4-7)

Saul was born again that day and became known as the Apostle Paul. He became the first and most influential interpreter of Jesus' message and teachings, a passionate missionary, founder of many Christian communities, and author of several New Testament letters.

Like Saul, a few people have a sudden, intense spiritual rebirth that instantly changes their whole lives. However, for most of us, spiritual rebirth is not so much an event as it is a process of becoming more and more focused on spiritual things and less on selfish material things. Not that we drop out of the world, but we think more and more of how we can do God's work on earth instead of just living for ourselves.

God's kingdom will not come to total fulfillment in the present age. The kingdom will continue to exist and grow among the powers of evil. This is told in Jesus' Parable of the Weeds:

Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. "The owner's servants came to him and said,

'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?' 'An enemy did this,' he replied. 'The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' 'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'" (NIV, Matthew 13:24-30)

Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field." He answered, "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. "As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear. (NIV, Matthew 13:36-43)

The Parable of the Weeds tells us that, like the farmer who sowed good seed, Jesus has brought God's kingdom into the world. However, it will not be totally fulfilled in this age. Like wheat growing among weeds, God's kingdom will exist and grow amidst the forces of evil that are so prevalent in our world.

We should not look for ease or perfection in this life. Those who belong to the kingdom and serve God will continue to live among those who (knowingly or unknowingly) serve the powers of evil. In the end, though, if we are able to cling to our faith despite all the surrounding evil, we will be freed from the evil of the world and live in perfect harmony with God. The ultimate fate of those who serve the forces of evil, whether by design or neglect, will be grim to say the least.

Being born again and entering the kingdom of God is a process of gradually coming to obey God's commandments instead of a "sin now, pray later" attitude. It is learning to truly obey Jesus' great commandment to "Love God with all your heart and soul and love your neighbor as yourself." It is listening to our consciences and spending time in prayer to ask for guidance and wisdom. It is feeling secure that God will give us the strength to face whatever challenges come our way and will take care of us in the end.

Related verses: Matthew 3:11, Matthew 5:8, Matthew 7:13-14, Matthew 7:21-23, Matthew 11:12, Matthew 11:25-26, Matthew 13:23-29, Matthew 5:20, Matthew 13:11-23, Matthew 13:33, Matthew 13:44-50, Matthew 16:8-12, Matthew 18:23-35, Matthew 19:13-14, Matthew 19:16-26, Matthew 20:20-28, Matthew 21:28-32, Matthew 23:11-12, Mark 4:1-20, Mark 4:30-32, Mark 9:35-37, Mark 10:17-27, Mark 10:42-44, Luke 8:1-18, Luke 9:48, Luke 11:9-13, Luke 12:22-31, Luke 12:49-53, Luke 13:22-28, Luke 15:24, Luke

18:15-16, Luke 18:18-30, Luke 19:1-10, Luke 21:10-11, John 6:57-58, John 6:63, John 8:12, John 14:16-17, John 18:36.

Love the Lord Your God

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" **"The most important one,"** answered Jesus, **"is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'**" (NIV, Mark 12:28-30)

Jesus said loving God is the most important of all the commandments. But what does loving God really mean? Here are six ways that Jesus taught us to express and demonstrate our love for God:

- **Know and Obey God's Commandments**
- **Trust in God and Jesus**
- **Put God Above All Else**
- **Be Committed**
- **Be Humble before God and Men**
- **Make Time for Prayer**

Know and Obey God's Commandments

"..., blessed are those who hear the word of God, and observe it." (NAS, Luke 11:28)

Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him. (NIV, John 14:21)

In both testaments, the words for obey also carry the idea of hearing. The two concepts are inseparable. The Hebrew *shama* means both "to listen to" and "obey," as does the Greek word *hupakouo*. The biblical concept is, then, of a hearing that takes place and the need to comply with what is heard... Obedience is the supreme test of faith in God (1 Samuel 15:22-24), or, as the NT puts it, "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:14-26). Thus obedience and faith are always very closely linked in the Bible (Young, p. 396).

Jesus repeatedly called for obedience to God's commandments and to His own teachings; we are called to put our faith into action. The commandments we are called to obey are best summarized by the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17), Jesus' Great Commandments to Love God with all your heart and soul and love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:28-31), and the teachings of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1 – 7:29).

It is abundantly clear throughout the Bible that this is *not* an area where we are free to live by our own feelings of right and wrong. The principles that must guide our lives every minute of every day are set out in no uncertain terms. Perfect obedience must be our constant goal.

In Matthew 7:21, Jesus says that simply calling on Him is not sufficient to enter the kingdom of heaven; we must also do God's will. In the Parable of The Wise and Foolish Builders (Luke 6:46-49), Jesus compares a man who hears His words and puts them into practice to a house built on a solid foundation or rock; it will weather any storm. On the other hand, a man who hears His words and does not put them into practice is like a house built without a foundation; the first storm will cause it to collapse and be destroyed.

Despite our best efforts, however, we are only human and will fail again and again to live up to the ideals set forth by Jesus. Fortunately, God is always willing to forgive and forget our sins and failures as long as we are sincerely sorry and are willing to also forgive those who sin against us.

For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (NIV, Matthew 6:14-15)

"... heaven will be happier over one lost sinner who returns to God than over ninety-nine others who haven't strayed away!" (TLB, Luke 15:7)

Related verses: Matthew 5:14-16, Matthew 5:18-19, Matthew 5:48, Matthew 6:24, Matthew 7:15-20, Matthew 7:21-27, Matthew 12:46-50, Matthew 13:2-23, Matthew 23:27-28, Mark 3:31-35, Mark 4:1-20, Luke 6:46-49, Luke 8:4-18, Luke 10:38-42, Luke 11:27-28, Luke 11:33-36, John 8:51, John 14:15, John 14:21-24, John 15:9-10, John 15:14, John 15:17

Trust in God and Jesus

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. (NIV, John 14:1)

Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." (NIV, John 6:28-29)

We live in an age of rational thought, scientific knowledge, secular government and cultural diversity. Can there be any room in our lives for simple faith? Yet, simple child-like faith is exactly what Jesus calls us to. Just as a small child trusts completely in his or her parents, Jesus calls us to trust completely in Him and His Father in heaven:

And they were bringing children to Him so that He might touch them; and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, "Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of

God belongs to such as these. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it at all. " And He took them in His arms and began blessing them, laying His hands upon them. (NAS, Mark 10:13-16)

Rationality, logic, and science are useful tools for understanding and controlling the material world. Faith is different. It operates in the spiritual realm, not the material realm. Things of the material world cannot invalidate the truths of our faith, nor does our faith invalidate the truths of the material world. There is no conflict between the two realms as long as we understand that true faith is a freely given gift from God; it is not derived from science, logic, or rational thought.

Everywhere around us there is war, prejudice, crime, exploitation and all kinds of suffering. How can we maintain our faith in the face of such overwhelming evil? Jesus simply calls us to trust God and maintain our faith *in spite of* all the incomprehensible evils of the world. We can (and should) try to make our world a better place for all of us to live. However, bringing it to perfection is a job only God can do, and it will happen only on His timetable. Speaking of the trials and evils to come, Jesus said:

At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. (NIV, Matthew 24:10-13)

We are called to simple, sincere, freely chosen faith. God will not give any miraculous sign that would force us to believe against our own will:

The Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. To test him, they asked him for a sign from heaven. He sighed deeply and said, "Why does this generation ask for a miraculous sign? I tell you the truth, no sign will be given to it." (NIV, Mark 8:11-12)

Maintaining our faith in the face of all of life's disappointments, suffering, and cynicism is a daily challenge. But, if we can meet that challenge, we can rise above all those evils. Then we can be at peace with God, with our fellow men, women and children of the world, and with ourselves.

Related verses: Matthew 4:18-20, Matthew 5:14-16, Matthew 6:25-34, Matthew 7:7-8, Matthew 9:18-19, Matthew 9:20-22, Matthew 9:23-26, Matthew 9:27-30, Matthew 12:38-40, Matthew 16:1-4, Matthew 18:1-4, Matthew 21:16-22, Mark 1:16-18, Mark 9:17-27, Mark 10:13-16, Luke 5:4-6, Luke 5:18-26, Luke 7:36-47, Luke 10:38-42, Luke 12:22-31, Luke 17:5-6, Luke 17:11-14, Luke 18:15-17, John 1:40-41, John 1:47-49, John 6:28-29, John 6:66-69, John 8:28-32, John 10:11-12, John 10:30, John 10:38, John 11:25-26, John 11:32-45, John 12:44, John 14:8-11.

Put God Above All Else

"No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money." (NIV, Luke 16:13)

There is nothing evil about owning the things we need. However, when we strive to collect wealth or possessions beyond our need, we may neglect our duty to God, to our families, and to mankind.

Jesus said that serving God and serving wealth are incompatible goals. It is all too easy to become obsessed with wealth and possessions. Because technology has provided such an abundance of consumer goods, the quest for possessions may be an even stronger temptation now than in Jesus' time. We may work long hours at stressful jobs so we can afford a luxury car, a larger house, designer clothing, and countless other items.

When a rich young man asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life (Matthew 19:16-24, Mark 10:17-25), Jesus probably knew the man was obsessed with wealth. He told the man to sell his many possessions and give the money to the poor. Sadly, the man could not bring himself to give up his great wealth, even for the promise of eternal life from Jesus, Himself!

An obsession with wealth is not the only thing that can come between God and us. Any desire that becomes too important in our lives can cause us to lose sight of God's love. While speaking to a group of religious leaders, Jesus mentioned a number of things that can separate us from God:

And then he added, "It is the thought-life that pollutes. For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts of lust, theft, murder, adultery, wanting what belongs to others, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, pride, and all other folly. All these vile things come from within; they are what pollute you and make you unfit for God." (TLB, Mark 7:20-23)

To keep Jesus' commandment to **"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength,"** we must always keep the things of God foremost in our minds.

Related verses: Matthew 4:8-10, Matthew 5:3-11, Matthew 6:19-21, Matthew 6:24, Matthew 16:26, Matthew 21:33-43, Matthew 23:37-39, Mark 8:36-37, Mark 12:1-10, Mark 13:31-37, Luke 6:24-26, Luke 9:25, Luke 10:41-42, Luke 11:23, Luke 12:13-34, Luke 13:34-35, Luke 20:9-18.

Be Committed

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me." (NAS, Matthew 16:24-26)

Jesus had little patience for half-hearted or hypocritical followers. He was totally and passionately committed to fulfilling His earthly mission, and He expected the same of His followers. We can never fully live up to Jesus' example, but we *can* do our best to live our faith every hour of every day.

Not only must we be committed, we must be committed to the right cause. We must be sure, through study and prayer, that we are following God's agenda and not our own. We must be sure to follow the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17), Jesus' Great Commandments to Love God with all your heart and soul and love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:28-31), and the teachings of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1 – 7:29).

We may find commitment to be inconvenient and difficult. We could suffer loss of wealth, power and prestige. It could even be dangerous. Jesus promised the burden will never be too great to bear, though:

"Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. "Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. "For My yoke is easy, and My load is light." (NAS, Matthew 11:28-30)

Commitment to carrying out God's plan may be may be inconvenient and may conflict with our own desires. However, the peace of mind, purposefulness of life, and eternal rewards will be immeasurably great.

Related verses: Matthew 7:13-14, Matthew 10:37-38, Matthew 8:18-22, Matthew 13:1-23, Matthew 16:24-26, Mark 4:1-20, Mark 10:29-31, Mark 12:41-44, Luke 8:1-18, Luke 9:23-24, Luke 9:61-62, Luke 12:35-48, Luke 14:26-27

Be Humble before God and Men

... the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (NIV, Matthew 18:1-4)

Humility before God means realizing that all we have and all we are is a gift from God. We are God's children and should show Him our complete faith and trust. It also means

realizing that God has a plan for each of us, and it is our job to follow that plan, not to follow our own agendas. Each of us has been given unique talents that we can (and should) use to improve our lives and the lives of others.

Humility before men is a quality of being courteously respectful of others. It is the opposite of aggressiveness, arrogance, boastfulness, and vanity. It is the quality that lets us go more than halfway to meet the needs and demands of others. Jesus said that wealth, power, status and pride will count for nothing in the kingdom of God. Faith, humility and service to others are the qualities of true value:

The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. (NIV, Matthew 23:11-12)

In our age of instant communication, jet travel, and massive migrations of people, we are becoming more and more a worldwide society rather than a number of isolated groups as in the past. Our different beliefs and cultures often clash with one another. How should we deal with people of different faiths? Jesus calls us to spread the good news to all peoples. However, we are *not* called to impose our faith, beliefs and values on others. (Forced faith is no faith at all!) Rather, like a light shining on a hill, we should let the goodness of our lives demonstrate the validity of our faith:

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden... Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven. " (NAS, Matthew 5:14,16)

Being humble means focusing more on God and others than on ourselves. Acting with humility does not in any way deny our own self-worth. Rather, it affirms the inherent worth of all persons and our trust in God. Some would consider humility to be a psychological malady that interferes with "success." However, wealth, power or status gained at the expense of others brings only anxiety – never peace and love.

Related verses: Matthew 5:3-11, Matthew 11:28-30, Matthew 18:1-5, Matthew 20:25-28, Matthew 23:11-12, Mark 9:35-37, Luke 14:10-11, Luke 17:7-10, Luke 18:9-14, Luke 20:46-47

Make Time for Prayer

"Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. "For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened. "Or what man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone? "Or if he shall ask for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him! (NAS, Matthew 7:7-11)

Prayer is loving communication with God. Prayer may be long or short, alone or in a group, silent or aloud, but should be a true communication with God and not done for public recognition. Important aspects of prayer include: (Lockyer, pp. 866-7)

- Expression of *faith* and trust in God
- *Worship* and *adoration* of God
- *Confession* of sins
- *Praise* of God's mighty deeds
- *Thanksgiving* for all the good things we have received
- *Dedication* to service to others
- *Requests* for our needs and the needs of others

God answers prayer requests in His own way in His own time, and will not grant requests that are against His holy and wise purposes, are selfish in nature, are not in our best long-term interest, or those made with impure motives. Often, we must be persistent in prayer. The answer, when it comes, may be in a form radically different than we expected.

Jesus spent a lot of time praying. He often went to a solitary place and prayed for hours at a time, especially at difficult times in His ministry. The famous *Lord's Prayer* is Jesus' model of the perfect prayer:

"This, then, is how you should pray: "'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, (NIV, Matthew 6:9)

First, we call God by the affectionate term "Father," and praise His holy name.

your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. (NIV, Matthew 6:10)

We ask that God's will be done on earth and in our lives.

Give us today our daily bread. (NIV, Matthew 6:11)

We ask to be given the things we need, but we don't ask for things we merely desire.

Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. (NIV, Matthew 6:12)

We ask forgiveness of our sins and acknowledge that we must also forgive those who sin against us.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.' (NIV, Matthew 6:13)

Finally, we ask for the strength to resist the temptation to follow the path of evil.

Prayer is the expression of our inner spiritual needs. Through prayer we can find strength of spirit, guidance and wisdom, joy and inner peace.

Related verses: Matthew 5:44, Matthew 6:5-15, Matthew 14:23, Matthew 26:36-41, Mark 1:35, Mark 11:24-25, Luke 5:16, Luke 6:12, Luke 6:28, Luke 9:18-20, Luke 9:28-29, Luke 11:5-13, Luke 18:1-14, Luke 22:40.

Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

And one of the scribes came and heard them arguing, and recognizing that He had answered them well, asked Him, "What commandment is the foremost of all?" Jesus answered, **"The foremost is, 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' 'The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."** (NAS, Mark 12:28-31)

In Jesus' teachings, our relationship with our fellow men, women and children is inseparable from our relationship with God. Love of God and love of our neighbors are two aspects of the same calling:

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (NIV, John 13:34-35)

Who is my Neighbor?

We commonly think of neighbors as the people who live near us, but Jesus meant it to include all mankind – even our enemies! Jesus told His famous parable of the Good Samaritan to make it clear that "love your neighbor" means to love all persons, everywhere – not just our friends, allies, countrymen, etc.:

One day an expert on Moses' laws came to test Jesus' orthodoxy by asking him this question: "Teacher, what does a man need to do to live forever in heaven?" Jesus replied, "What does Moses' law say about it?" "It says," he replied, "that you must 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 you must love your neighbor just as much as you love yourself." "Right!" Jesus told him. "Do this and you shall live!" The man wanted to justify (his lack of love for some kinds of people), so he asked, "Which neighbors?" Jesus replied with an illustration: "A Jew going on a trip from Jerusalem to Jericho was attacked by bandits. They stripped him of his clothes and money, and beat him up and left him lying half dead beside the road. "By chance a Jewish priest came along; and when he saw the man lying there, he crossed to the other side of the road and passed him by. A Jewish Temple-assistant walked over and looked at him lying there, but then went on. "But a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw him, he felt deep pity. Kneeling beside him the Samaritan soothed his wounds with medicine and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his donkey and walked along beside him till they came to an inn, where he nursed him through the night. The next day he handed the innkeeper two twenty-dollar bills and told him to take care of the man. 'If his bill runs higher than that,' he said, 'I'll pay the difference the next time I am here.' "Now which of these three would you say was a neighbor to the bandits' victim?" The man

replied, "The one who showed him some pity." Then Jesus said, "Yes, now go and do the same." (TLB, Luke 10:25-37)

The Jews and Samaritans had been enemies for hundreds of years. The Jews of Jesus' society considered the Samaritans to be ceremonially unclean, socially outcast, religious heretics (Mays, p. 1029). Yet, the Samaritan took pity on the poor man who had been robbed and beaten. He gave freely of both his time and his money to help this Jewish man who was not only a stranger, but also an enemy from a foreign country. In His parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus challenges us to **"Go and do the same."**

To reinforce that "love your neighbor" applies to everyone, Jesus extended the rule of love to even our enemies!

"There is a saying, 'Love your friends and hate your enemies.' But I say: Love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way you will be acting as true sons of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust too. If you love only those who love you, what good is that? Even scoundrels do that much. If you are friendly only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even the heathen do that. But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect. (TLB, Matthew 5:43-48)

Like the unselfish Samaritan man of Jesus' parable, we are called to extend our love and concern to all persons everywhere, as our neighbors. We should not exclude anyone or any group because of social status, a supposed character fault, religious difference, racial difference, ethnic difference, citizenship difference, etc.

Related verses: Matthew 22:34-39, Luke 6:27-38

Forgive Others

Jesus calls us to remember that we are all God's children. Just as He loves all His people and is willing to forgive their sins, we must be willing to forgive others who have done wrong to us:

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

Anger can consume us with hatred and block out the love of God. Whether between parent and child, spouses, friends, or nations, expressions of anger divide us and drive us toward open hostility. More often than not, our angry feelings are based on a misinterpretation of what someone said or did. A grudge clouds our judgment and may lead us to an act of revenge that can never be undone.

The Old Testament law specified equal revenge for equal wrong: "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" (Exodus 21:23-25, Leviticus 24:19-20.) But this rule was too harsh for

the new age of the kingdom of God. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said the right thing to do is to take no revenge at all.

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' 'But I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. (NAS, Matthew 5:38-39)

The need to forgive is not some ideal that we cannot hope to attain. Forgiveness is necessary to free us from the dark cloud of anger and resentment that can literally destroy our own lives. We cannot afford to wait for the other person to repent and apologize. Unless we let go of our anger and the desire to punish or get even, the love of God cannot enter our lives.

Related verses: Matthew 6:12, Matthew 5:21-24, Matthew 5:38-48, Matthew 18:21-35, Mark 11:25, Luke 6:37, Luke 17:3-4

Help the Needy

"But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. "And all the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. "Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 'For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.' "Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You drink? 'And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? 'And when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' "And the King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.' "Then He will also say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.' "Then they themselves also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?' "Then He will answer them, saying, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.' "And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (NAS, Matthew 25:31-46)

Jesus could hardly have made things plainer than in His Parable of the Sheep and Goats, above. We are not meant to live hard-hearted or self-centered lives. We are called to put our faith into practice and truly love our neighbors, especially those less fortunate.

God has given each of us unique talents and gifts to use in His service. His work for us on earth is to use our gifts and talents in the service of others! Each of us has something to offer to someone in need. We can give our money and our time to charity, be a friend to someone who is sick or lonely, do volunteer work, or be a peacemaker. We may give unselfishly of our time to our spouse, children or parents. We may choose a service-oriented occupation, or we may just do our everyday jobs with integrity and respect for others.

It would seem that the more we give to others, the poorer we become, but just the opposite is true! Service to others brings meaning and fulfillment to our lives in a way that wealth, power, possessions and self-centered pursuits can never match. As Jesus said,

For if you give, you will get! Your gift will return to you in full and overflowing measure, pressed down, shaken together to make room for more, and running over. Whatever measure you use to give— large or small— will be used to measure what is given back to you." (TLB, Luke 6:38)

Does this mean we can't satisfy Jesus' command unless we have abundant wealth to give, or extraordinary talents to serve other? No! It is *not how much* we give, *but the spirit* in which we give that counts with God. Each of us is called to give generously of what wealth and talents we have been given – whether it is a little or a lot. Jesus compared a poor widow, who gave only a little, to the wealthy men who gave much more. The wealthy men had only given a token amount from their great wealth. In God's eyes, the widow gave much more because she gave from the heart:

Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything— all she had to live on." (NIV, Mark 12:41-44)

Each of us has something to give. Some have wealth, some have talents, and some have time. Whatever gifts we have been given – large or small – we should share generously. When we do, we make the world better for someone else and find true meaning and satisfaction in our own lives.

Related verses: Matthew 6:1-4, Mark 9:35, Mark 10:17-27, Mark 12:41-44, Luke 6:30, Luke 14:12-14, Luke 12:33-34, Luke 14:12-14, Luke 19:1-9, Luke 21:1-4.

Follow the Golden Rule

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets. (NIV, Matthew 7:12)

The Golden Rule, spoken by Jesus, is possibly the best-known quote from the Bible, and sums up Jesus' ethical teachings in one short sentence. If we wish to be loved, we must give love. If we wish to be respected, we must respect all persons – even those we dislike. If we wish to be forgiven, we must also forgive. If we wish others to speak kindly of us, we must speak kindly of them and avoid gossip. If we want strong marriages, we must be loyal and faithful to our spouses. If we wish to be fulfilled in our lives, we must share generously with others. If we wish to reap the rewards of our Heavenly Father's love, we must truly love all His people.

If we do not wish to be judged harshly, then we must not judge others harshly. Often we are tempted to call someone else a "sinner" or to think of ourselves as holier. However, we are called to correct the faults within ourselves, not to criticize or condemn others:

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. (NIV, Matthew 7:1-5)

Jesus' comical story tells of a man trying to remove a speck of sawdust (a minor fault) from his friend's eye while he is blinded by a huge plank (a major fault) in his own eye. Jesus says that as long as we have our own faults and sinfulness (which we always will), we do not have the right to criticize others.

The golden rule – treat others as you would want to be treated – is the standard Jesus set for dealing with other people.

Related verses: Matthew 5:22-28, Matthew 12:34-37, Matthew 20:25-28, Mark 9:35-37, Luke 6:27-36, Luke 6:37-38, Luke 12:57-59, John 8:3-11

In His sermons and parables, Jesus seeks to shock us out of our selfishness and worldliness and create in us a true passion for the welfare of our fellow men, women and children around the world. Universal love is at the very heart of Jesus' teachings; it is God's earthly work for us.

What matters to God is our love for Him and our love for each other. Wealth, power and status count for nothing in the kingdom of God. When we truly love our neighbors, we do our part to make the world a better place, and we find our own fulfillment in life.

The Parables of Jesus

Introduction

Bible scholar Madeline Boucher writes,

The importance of the parables can hardly be overestimated. They comprise a substantial part of the recorded preaching of Jesus. The parables are generally regarded by scholars as among the sayings which we can confidently ascribe to the historical Jesus; they are, for the most part, authentic words of Jesus. Moreover, all of the great themes of Jesus' preaching are struck in the parables. (Boucher, p.9)

What is a Parable?

Jesus' parables are short stories that teach a moral or spiritual lesson by analogy or similarity. They are often stories based on the agricultural life that was intimately familiar to His original first century audience. Some aspect of an unfamiliar concept, such as the kingdom of God, was compared to something from everyday life that could easily be understood.

It is the lesson of a parable that is important to us. The story is not important in itself; it may or may not be literally true.

Jesus was the master of teaching in parables. His parables often have an unexpected twist or surprise ending that catches the reader's attention. They are also cleverly designed to draw listeners into new ways of thinking, new attitudes and new ways of acting (Getty-Sullivan, pp. 2-4).

Each of Jesus' parables teaches only one or two important lessons. It is a mistake to look for meaning in every sentence or detail of the story (Lockyer, *Parable*). If we get bogged down analyzing the details of the parable, we may miss the central point, as in the proverbial saying, "You can't see the forest for the trees."

Why Did Jesus Teach in Parables?

When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that

'they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.' " (NRSV, Mark 4:10-12)

Jesus' explanation seems harsh and out of character. Was He deliberately trying to hide the truth by speaking in parables? Were the mysteries of the kingdom of God to be known

only by the disciples? Both experts and lay persons are puzzled, and many different explanations have been proposed.

Jesus quoted from Isaiah 6:9-10. The prophet Isaiah had found that people were so lost in sin that they resented hearing God's Word and deliberately turned away. Jesus experienced the same disappointment and frustration. Thus, the most common interpretation of Jesus' saying is that the people's hardness of heart (pride, arrogance and prejudice) prevented them from understanding and accepting Jesus' teachings. Barclay explains it this way:

When Isaiah spoke he spoke half in irony and half in despair and altogether in love. He was thinking, "God sent me to bring his truth to this people; and for all the good I am doing I might as well have been sent to shut their minds to it. I might as well be speaking to a brick wall. You would think that God had shut their minds to it."

So Jesus spoke his parables; he meant them to flash into men's minds and to illuminate the truth of God. But in so many eyes he saw a dull incomprehension. He saw so many people blinded by prejudice, deafened by wishful thinking, too lazy to think. He turned to his disciples and he said to them: "Do you remember what Isaiah once said? He said that when he came with God's message to God's people Israel in his day they were so dully un-understanding that you would have thought that God had shut instead of opening their minds; I feel like that to-day." When Jesus said this, he did not say it in anger, or irritation, or bitterness, or exasperation. He said it with the wistful longing of frustrated love, the poignant sorrow of a man who had a tremendous gift to give which people were too blind to take.

If we read this, hearing not a tone of bitter exasperation, but a tone of regretful love, it will sound quite different. It will tell us not of a God who deliberately blinded men and hid his truth, but of men who were so dully uncomprehending that it seemed no use even for God to try to penetrate the iron curtain of their lazy incomprehension. God save us from hearing his truth like that! (Barclay, commentary on Mark 4:1-12)

Interpretation

By nature, a parable invites the reader or listener to supply the interpretation, and some of Jesus' parables have been interpreted in more than one way. Jesus, Himself, supplied the interpretation for some of His parables. But in other cases, it is left to us to determine the meaning and lesson.

Some of the parables are difficult to interpret, but the meaning is clear in most cases. Even Jesus' enemies often understood His parables, even though they did not accept the lesson (Matthew 21:45-46). Jesus' original audience in first century Palestine probably knew exactly what He was saying in most cases. Those of us who are far removed from that time and place need some help from historians and Bible scholars to understand the original cultural context and issues involved.

From historical knowledge and Jesus' other teachings, there is a broad consensus within the mainstream of Christian thought about the meaning of most of the parables. Those are the interpretations we give here.

Related verses: Matthew 13.10-17; Luke 8.9-10

The Kingdom of God

The kingdom of God is the centerpiece of Jesus' teachings. Matthew speaks instead of the "kingdom of heaven." However, a number of passages in Matthew are virtually identical to those in Mark and Luke, except for the substitution of "kingdom of heaven" for "kingdom of God." Thus, the same reality is intended. The Gospel of John mentions the kingdom only twice but refers many times to the closely related concept of eternal life.

For hundreds of years, the Jews had been expecting the decisive intervention of God to restore the glory of Israel and defeat its enemies. When John the Baptist and then Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom was at hand, it was certainly understood in terms of this expectation. (Marshall, *Kingdom of God, Kingdom of Heaven*)

However, the kingdom initiated by Jesus is not the earthly kingdom that was widely inferred from the Old Testament prophecies. It is a spiritual kingdom that is now growing in the hearts of men and women, and it will find its fulfillment in the eventual sovereign rule of God and defeat of all evil. Those people who choose to belong to God's kingdom and serve Him are those who are destined to inherit eternal life in God's presence.

The Parable of the Sower

Jesus often compared the kingdom of God to a seed planted in the hearts of men and women. Each of us has the seed of the kingdom within us, but it will grow only if we give it the proper "care and feeding." Jesus tells of this aspect of the kingdom in His Parable of the Sower:

“A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear.” (NIV, Matthew 13:3-9)

This is one of the Parables that Jesus explained privately for His disciples, and here is His explanation:

“Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he

lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.” (NIV, Matthew 13:18-23)

There are many ways of responding to God's word. Some may hear it but reject it. Some may accept it but not act on it. The lesson of this parable is that we must hear, accept *and* act on God's word.

Just as the farmer scatters seed throughout the field, God gives His word to the entire world.

Just as the seed cannot take root on the trampled and hardened path, God's word is rejected by people having hearts hardened by pride and hatred.

Just as the seed that falls on shallow soil wilts in the sun, some people have shallow faith. They are enthusiastic about God's word until it becomes inconvenient or makes demands on them. Then they fall away.

Just as the seed that falls among thorns is crowded out, God's word can be crowded out by worries and pursuit of wealth.

Just as the seed that falls on good soil yields a bountiful crop, God's word is fruitful in people who listen, understand and obey. The kingdom of God yields great results in and through these people.

Related verses: Matthew 5:16, 6:25, 10:22, 2 Corinthians 4:8-10, James 2:14-17, John 3:36, 1 Peter 4:17, 2 Thessalonians 3:13, 1 Timothy 6:10, James 1:22-25, 1 John 2:9.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

[Jesus] put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.” (NRSV, Matthew 13:31-32)

The Parable of the Mustard Seed is also in Mark 4:30-32 and Luke 13:18-19. The Parable of the Yeast (Matthew 13:33, Luke 13:20-21) and the Parable of the Growing Seed (Mark 4:26-29) are similar.

There are different opinions about the meaning of this parable. Most commonly, the seed is seen as representing the kingdom of God initiated in the world by Jesus. Just as the tiny seed grows into a large tree, the kingdom of God will grow into a powerful spiritual kingdom. Similarly in Matthew 13:33, just as a small amount of yeast grows to leaven an

entire loaf of bread, the kingdom of God will grow large and powerful until it eventually controls the entire world. In both cases, great results come from tiny beginnings.

Yeast is used as an evil symbol other places in the Bible (Mark 8:15, 1 Corinthians 5:6). That has led to an alternate interpretation that the seed represents evil introduced into the Church by Satan (Boice pp. 24-27). The evil will grow to corrupt and undermine the Church. However, this interpretation does not fit well with Jesus' other teachings, and the yeast could just as well be a symbol of anything, good or bad, that permeates whatever it touches (Lockyer, *Leaven*).

Related verses: Matthew 3:2, 10:7, 17:20, Mark 1:15, 4:30-32, 9:1, Luke 10:9, 13:18-21, 17:20-21

The Parable of the Hidden Treasure and The Parable of the Pearl of Great Price

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.” (NRSV, Matthew 13:44-46)

In both parables, a person was willing to give up all his worldly possessions to obtain something of even greater value. In a similar way, the kingdom of God has more value to us than any worldly things - possessions, pleasures, prejudices or pride.

It is sometimes noted that the buyer acted deceitfully in the Parable of the Hidden Treasure. He was morally obligated to inform the owner of the field about the treasure. However, we have to keep in mind that there is only one lesson in the parable; it is a mistake to look for meaning in every detail of the story.

Related verses: Daniel 2:44, Luke 1:33, Romans 14:17, Colossians 1:13, 2 Peter 1:10-11, Philippians 3:8-9.

The Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds

Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. “The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’ “ ‘An enemy did this,’ he replied. “The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’ “ ‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’ ” (NIV, Matthew 13:24-30)

Then [Jesus] left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.” He answered, “The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. “As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear. (NIV, Matthew 13:36-43)

There is a weed named darnel that closely resembles wheat in the early stages of growth. There was no way to determine which was wheat and which was darnel until both had matured and it was time for the harvest. Then the poisonous darnel had to be laboriously separated from the wheat (Barclay, *Commentary on Matthew 13:24-30*).

Just as both wheat and weeds grow together in a field, there are both good people and evil people in the world. Some people do God's work in the world and some people do Satan's work.

Just as it is difficult to distinguish the darnel from the wheat, we cannot accurately determine who is truly good and who is truly evil. With our limited human understanding, an evil person may appear to be good, and a good person may appear to be evil.

Just as the owner of the field prohibited his servants from pulling up the weeds, it is not our privilege to judge other people. That is God's privilege alone.

Just as the harvesters separate the weeds from the wheat in the end, God will determine who is truly good and who is truly evil at the final judgment.

In this parable, Jesus warns us against substituting our judgment for God's judgment. Our inability to see into another person's heart as well as our fears, jealousies and prejudices prevent us from making accurate judgments about other people. Only God knows all the facts about a person. Even evil people have an opportunity to repent until the time of death. We must be tolerant of other people and leave the task of judgment to God.

Related verses: Matthew 7:1-5, 13:47-50, Romans 14:10-14, 1 Corinthians 4:3-5, James 4:11-12.

God's Love, Mercy and Forgiveness

The Parable of the Lost Sheep, The Parable of the Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10) and The Parable of the Prodigal Son all tell of God's infinite mercy and love, even for sinners.

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

“What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!’ I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” (NAS, Luke 15:4-7)

Just as the sheep is lost and in danger, many among us are separated from God and lost in sin.

Just as the owner of the sheep makes every possible effort to find his lost sheep, God makes every possible effort to bring sinners to repentance and forgiveness.

Just as a person rejoices when a long-lost treasure is found, God rejoices when a lost sinner repents.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

This is actually two parables combined in one - the parable of the younger son and the parable of the older son.

The younger son:

Jesus told them this story: “A man had two sons. The younger son told his father, ‘I want my share of your estate now before you die.’ So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.

“A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.

“When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, ‘At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! I will go home to my father and say, ‘Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.’”

“So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.’

“But his father said to the servants, ‘Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.’ So the party began.

The older son:

“Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, and he asked one of the servants what was going on. ‘Your brother is back,’ he was told, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.’

“The older brother was angry and wouldn’t go in. His father came out and begged him, but he replied, ‘All these years I’ve slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!’

“His father said to him, ‘Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!’” (NLT, Luke 15:11-32)

In this parable the younger son represents people who are lost in sin and the father represents God.

The younger son's demand to take his share of the inheritance early showed his youthful arrogance and disrespect for his father. Only the harsh reality of life away from his father's protection brought him to his senses. Just as the immature young son found by hard experience that his life of wild living led to desperation, we may find by hard experience that the lures of wealth and pleasure lead us to a life of emptiness separated from God.

But the father's love is the main topic of this parable. Just as the father loved his disrespectful son and longed for his return, God loves all sinners and waits patiently for them to repent and return to His love and protection.

Just as the father rejoiced when his son repented, God rejoices when a lost sinner repents.

Just as the father forgave his son and welcomed him back with full status in the family, God will forgive sinners and welcome them back with full status in the kingdom of God.

The older son represents people who are self-righteous and critical of others.

Unlike the disrespectful and foolish younger son, the older son had been loyal to his father his entire life. It is easy to understand why he felt angry and jealous about the attention his father lavished on the returning younger son. But he was also disrespectful to his father and resented the mercy his father extended to his brother.

Jesus may have originally directed this parable at the *Pharisees*, a self-righteous religious group that would rather see a sinner punished than saved. But we have to be aware of the "Pharisee" in ourselves when we are tempted to criticize, shun, exclude or punish people we think of as sinners. That is God's privilege alone (Matthew 7:1-5, Romans 14:10-13, 1 Corinthians 4:3-5, James 4:11-12).

Related verses: Ezekiel 34:16, Matthew 18:10-14, Luke 6:32-36, John 3:16, Romans 5:8, 10:12, 2 Corinthians 1:3, 1 John 4:8-10.

Christian Love

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

He answered, "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, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." (TNIV, Luke 10:25-37)

"Love your neighbor as yourself" was part of the Old Testament law (Leviticus 19:18). But the Jewish teachers had often interpreted "neighbor" to include only people of their own nationality and religion. The expert in the law was looking to Jesus for justification for that interpretation, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" In response, Jesus told His famous *Parable of the Good Samaritan*.

Samaria was a region of central Palestine that was once the capital of Israel. The Assyrians captured Samaria in 721 B.C. They deported many of the inhabitants and replaced them with foreign colonists (2 Kings 17:24-33). The colonists were pagans who eventually intermarried with the remaining Jews. They adopted the religion of Israel, but they also continued to worship their pagan idols. The Jews considered the Samaritans to be religious heretics of a foreign nationality and inferior race. The Samaritans offered to help rebuild the Jewish temple, but their offer was rudely rebuffed (Ezra 4:1-3). Finally the Samaritans built a rival temple on Mt. Gerizim and proclaimed it, rather than the Jewish temple, to be the true house of God. By the time of Jesus, the Jews and Samaritans had hated each other for hundreds of years.

With that background, it is easy to understand that there was no one that the Jewish expert in the law would have considered to be less of a "neighbor" than a Samaritan. If a Samaritan man could be a "neighbor" to the Jewish man who was robbed and beaten, then the definition of "neighbor" would have to include *all* people of the world.

In this parable, Jesus tells us that anyone in need is our neighbor, regardless of race, religion, nationality or any other artificial distinction.

The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive someone who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt."

"The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go."

"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded."

"His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'"

“But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive a brother or sister from your heart.” (TNIV, Matthew 18:21-35)

Jesus told this parable in response to Peter's question, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jewish tradition required forgiving another person three times, so Peter probably thought he was being generous to offer seven times. But Jesus answered, **“I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”** In other words, forgiveness must be unlimited.

The servant owed the king an absurdly large amount of money; he could never hope to pay it back. But just as the king was merciful and forgave his servant's impossibly huge debt, God is also merciful and will forgive our sins, no matter how many or how large.

But just as the king angrily revoked the unforgiving servant's pardon, God will not forgive our sins unless we extend our mercy to others and sincerely forgive them for any wrongs they have done to us.

The lesson is clear: we must forgive if we wish to be forgiven by God. There is no room in the Christian life for revenge, retaliation, getting even or holding a grudge.

Related verses: Proverbs 19:11, Matthew 5:44-45, 6:12, 6:14-15, Mark 11:25, Luke 6:37, 17:3-4, Romans 12:14, 12:17-19, Ephesians 4:31-32, Colossians 3:12-14, 1 Peter 3:10, James 2:13, 1 John 4:20-21.

Persistence in Prayer

The Parable of the Persistent Widow

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his

chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. (NRSV, Luke 18:1-8)

This parable tells us that we must be persistent in prayer and not give up. The Parable of the Friend Who Came at Midnight (Luke 11:5-8) is similar.

The parable compares God to an unjust judge and shows Him to be much more caring. If the unjust and uncaring judge can eventually be persuaded to give justice to the widow, then God, who is both just and loving, will surely give us the things we need.

God has promised to answer our prayers and give us everything we need and more (Mark 11:24, John 15:7). But a wise parent will not give a child everything he or she wants. Similarly, prayer is not a magical trick to get anything we want or a "quick fix" for problems that we should be solving ourselves. God answers prayer requests in His own way in His own time (Psalms 40:1-3), and will not grant requests that are against His holy and wise purposes (1 John 5:14-15), are selfish in nature, are not in our best long-term interest, or those made with impure motives (Psalms 66:18, Proverbs 28:9, Isaiah 29:13, Isaiah 59:2, Hebrews 11:6, James 4:3). The answer, when it comes, may be in a form radically different than we expected, and we must be alert to that possibility (Deuteronomy 3:23-27, 2 Corinthians 12:7-9). Sometimes, the answer must come from within ourselves and persistent prayer will help us find that answer. We may need a new attitude or a different way of looking at things, or we may need to make amends with somebody.

Related verses: Psalms 18:6, 2 Chronicles 7:14, Matthew 6:9-13, 7:7-11, Luke 11:9-13, Ephesians 3:20-21, James 1:5-6, 5:13-16.

Self-Righteousness and Humility

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

[Jesus] also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt:

“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 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. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’

“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!’

“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.” (NAS, Luke 18:9-14)

The Pharisees were an influential Jewish sect known for their strict observance of Jewish laws related to ritual purity and tithing. In conventional wisdom, no one would be thought of as more righteous than the Pharisees.

Tax collectors were Jews employed by the Roman Empire to collect taxes. Not only did they collect for the hated Roman Empire, they often cheated their own people by collecting more than was due and keeping the extra for themselves. In conventional wisdom, no one was a more despised sinner than a tax collector.

Jesus no doubt shocked His audience when He said the sinful tax collector was justified (declared not guilty of his sins by God) instead of the Pharisee!

But when the Pharisee prayed, he was very confident of his own righteousness. He heaped praise on himself and contempt on the tax collector. He failed to recognize that he, himself, was guilty of the sins of pride, self-righteousness and contempt for a fellow human being.

In contrast, the tax collector did not claim any merit of his own. He fully recognized his own sinfulness and his need for God's mercy.

Like the tax collector, we must recognize that we are all imperfect sinners by God's standards (Romans 3:23), and we must depend on God's mercy for our justification. Anyone who is self-righteous and looks at other "sinners" with contempt is actually committing a serious sin!

Related verses: Proverbs 26:12, Matthew 5:5-9, 7:1-5, 9:10-13, 18:10, 20:25-28, Mark 9:35, Luke 6:32-42, 7:36-50, 14:11, John 8:1-8, Romans 2:1-4, 3:23, 14:10-12, 1 Corinthians 4:5, 10:24, 13:1-7, 16:14, Ephesians 4:1-6, Galatians 6:1-3, Philippians 2:2-8, 2 Timothy 2:22-25, James 2:12-13, 4:11-12, 1 John 1:8

Stewardship

The Parable of the Talents

“Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey.

“The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

“After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.’

“His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’

“The man with the two talents also came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.’

“His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’

“Then the man who had received the one talent came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’

“His master replied, ‘You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.’

““Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (NIV, Matthew 25:14-30)

A talent was a very large sum of money worth something like 15 years wages for a laborer.

The three different sums of money entrusted to the servants in this parable represent the differing wealth and abilities God has entrusted to us. In fact, the English word "talent," meaning a natural ability, comes from the symbolism in this parable.

The first two servants invested the money that had been entrusted to them wisely and earned a return for their master. The master praised them greatly.

However, the third servant simply kept the money and did not put it to good use. The master was very angry with this servant for his laziness.

Like the money entrusted to the servants, the gifts we have received are not ours alone. God gave them to us for the purpose of serving Him and serving other people.

Like the master in the parable, Jesus has departed from earth and entrusted His work to us. But also like the master in the parable, Jesus will return someday to judge how well we have performed our duties.

The lesson is that Christ will judge us for what we have done or not done with the abilities and wealth we have been given. It is not sufficient for us to merely live without sinning. We must actively use the gifts we have been given to serve God and to serve other people. Each of us must honestly evaluate our gifts and prayerfully decide how they can be put to the best use. Some of us have been given small gifts and some great gifts, but we must all do our best with what we have:

... From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.
(NRSV, Luke 12:48)

Each of us has something to give. We can give our money and our time to charity, be a friend to someone who is sick or lonely, do volunteer work, or be a peacemaker, teacher or minister. We may give unselfishly of our time to our spouse, children or parents. We may choose a service-oriented occupation, or we may just do our everyday jobs with integrity and respect for others.

Related verses: Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 20:25-28, Mark 12:28-31, 12:41-44, Luke 6:38, 12:42-48, 19:11-27, 21:1-4, Acts 3:6, 20:35, Romans 12:5-8, 12:11, 1 Corinthians 1:24-30, 3:7-9, 4:1-2, 7:7, 12:4-11, 12:27-31, 14:12, Galatians 5:13-14, 6:9, Ephesians 4:10-12, 1 Peter 4:8-10, 2 Peter 1:5-7, Hebrews 6:10-12, James 1:22-27.

Preparation for the Future

The Parable of the Rich Fool

Then [Jesus] said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

And he told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’ “Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.” ’

“But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ “This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.” (NIV, Luke 12:15-21)

The rich man was wise and successful by worldly standards. He had enough wealth to keep him comfortable for many years, and building bigger barns would show everyone how very wealthy he was.

However, the rich man was a fool by God's standards. He let himself be blinded by his wealth. He never realized that his wealth was a gift from God to be used in God's service.

He thought of many things to please himself, but he never thought about sharing his abundant harvest with the poor. He prepared for his material well-being, but he never thought about being spiritually prepared for death and eternal life. He had become greedy and his wealth had become his god.

The lesson is that we must be rich in spiritual things, which are eternal, as opposed to being rich only in material things, which are temporary. Money, itself, is not evil. But greed and preoccupation with wealth can blind us to our duties to God and to other people.

Related verses: Leviticus 19:9-10, Psalms 119:36, Proverbs 23:4-5, 28:27, Isaiah 58:10-11, Matthew 6:19-21, 6:24-25, 16:26, 19:24, Mark 7:21-23, Luke 16:19-31, John 6:27, Ephesians 5:5, 1 Corinthians 6:10, 1 Timothy 6:9-11, 6:17-19, Hebrews 13:5, 1 John 2:15-17, 3:17.

The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But the wise replied, ‘No! There will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” (NRSV, Matthew 25:1-13)

Historians say this is a realistic portrayal of a first century Jewish wedding. It could have actually happened. The wedding procession would come to the bridegroom's home at an unexpected time. Once the wedding party had entered, the doors were locked and no one else would be admitted (Barclay, *Commentary on Matthew 25:1-13*).

Jesus is sometimes described figuratively as a bridegroom (Matthew 9:15, Mark 2:19-20, Luke 5:34-35, John 3:29). In this parable, the coming of the bridegroom represents the second coming of Jesus and the Final Judgment of all people. Just as the bridegroom in the parable arrived at an unexpected time, Jesus will return unexpectedly and without warning (Matthew 24:36, 24:42-44, Mark 13:32).

The wise bridesmaids represent those people who are always spiritually prepared for judgment. The foolish bridesmaids represent those people who put off preparations until it is too late. The necessary preparations cannot be made at the last minute.

The wedding feast represents the kingdom of God or eternal life. Once Jesus returns, there will be no more opportunities to repent. Those people who are spiritually unprepared will be locked out forever.

The lesson is that we must always be spiritually prepared for judgment. When Jesus returns or when we die, there will be no more opportunities to repent. *The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus* (Luke 16:19-31) teaches a similar lesson.

The Parable of the Final Judgment

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

"He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life." (TNIV, Matthew 25:31-46)

In this parable Jesus gives us the amazing idea that whatever we do to help people in need, we do for Jesus, Himself! Conversely, when we fail to help those in need, we also fail in our duty to Jesus.

Jesus makes it crystal clear that unselfish acts of charity are a requirement for salvation. Works of kindness for anyone in need are the true evidence of our faith.

Some Christians feel uneasy about this parable because they have been taught that salvation is by faith alone, not by good works. As a result, there have been a number of alternate interpretations proposed which restrict the meaning of "all the nations" or "the least of these brothers and sisters of mine" such that there is no requirement to help anyone alive today.

The doctrine of salvation by faith alone originated with Martin Luther (1483-1546), a Catholic monk and professor of Scripture at the University of Wittenberg in Germany. Luther taught that we can be justified (made acceptable to God) only by faith.

But Luther did not deny the importance of good works. He wrote, "For grace and faith are infused apart from our work, and when they are infused, then the works follow." In other words, when one is saved by the grace of God, he or she will practice good works as a result of that transformation.

Most Christian churches of today, both Catholic and Protestant, believe that faith and good works are inseparable aspects of salvation. Many churches, following the lead of Luther, teach that salvation is by faith alone, but good works follow as the necessary result and evidence of that salvation.

In his commentary on this parable, Presbyterian pastor James Montgomery Boice writes,

Does this mean that we are saved by works after all? Does it mean that the theology of the reformation is wrong? No, but it is a statement of the necessity of works following faith - if we are truly regenerate. ... We are not justified by works. But if we do not have works, we are not justified. We are not Christians. (Boice, p. 204)

So, there is no real conflict between mainstream Christian beliefs and the plain meaning of this parable. A person who has truly experienced God's saving grace will willingly, unselfishly and joyously do what he or she can to help others in need.

Different people have different amounts of wealth and different abilities to help others. It does not matter that some people do more than others. It does matter that we diligently do what we can (Luke 12:48).

Related verses: Leviticus 19:9-10, 25:35, Deuteronomy 14:28-29, Deuteronomy 15:7-11, Isaiah 58:6-7, Psalms 41:1-3, Proverbs 11:25, 14:21, 19:17, 22:9, 28:27, Isaiah 58:10-11, Matthew 5:42, 6:1-4, 19:21, Luke 3:10-11, 6:38, 11:41, 12:33-34, 21:1-4, Acts 20:35, Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, 13:1-13, 2 Corinthians 9:6-7, Galatians 2:10, 1 Timothy 5:16, 6:17-19, Hebrews 13:3, 13:16, James 1:27, 2:2-9, 2:15-16, 1 John 3:17-18

Conclusion

Jesus was the master of teaching in parables. His parables often have an unexpected twist or surprise ending that catches our attention and drives home the parable's lesson. The

parables give us a feeling and insight into heavenly and spiritual concepts that cannot be expressed in mere words. They also give us a much richer understanding of the kingdom of God and its values, which are often the opposite of worldly values. Without understanding the parables, it is impossible to fully understand Jesus and His teachings.

Epilogue

Jesus radically changed the world. He was a new kind of leader, a new kind of king. Instead of power and wealth, universal love was His standard of worthiness. Instead of the sword, the word of God was His "weapon."

Instead of the proud, worldly king, He was the humble bearer of the kingdom of God. Yet, no one in history has had the impact on world affairs that Jesus has. His teachings and principles have made their way into human thought throughout the world, far beyond the bounds of formal Christianity.

The essence of Jesus' message to us is this: God loves you. Love and respect Him in return. Love and care for all your fellow men, women and children around the world as much as you care for yourself.

The kingdom of God is still growing within and among us. The news headlines constantly remind us of all the very real evil surrounding us. However, millions and millions of men, women and children around the world are quietly, in their own ways, worshiping God, loving their neighbors, making the world a better place, and finding their personal peace and fulfillment as part of God's kingdom.

Appendix: Events of Jesus' Life and Ministry



Palestine at the time of Jesus (left) and today (right)

Event	Approx. date	Location	Reference
Jesus is born (commemorated on Christmas Day)	6-4 B.C.	Bethlehem	Matthew 1:18- 2:18, Luke 2:1-20
Jesus grows up		Nazareth	Matthew 2:19-23, Luke 2:39-52
At about age 30, Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist	26 A.D.	River Jordan	Matthew 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11, Luke 3:21-23, John 1:29-39
First miracle – turns water into wine at the wedding in Cana	26 A.D.	Cana	John 2:1-11
Talks with the Samaritan woman at the well – many Samaritans become believers as a result.	27 A.D.	Sychar	John 4:5-42

Chooses the 12 disciples	28 A.D.	Capernaum	Mark 3:13-19, Luke 6:12-15
Preaches the Sermon on the Mount	28 A.D.	Capernaum	Matthew 5:1 - 7:29, Luke 6:20-49
Raises a widow's son from the dead	28 A.D.	Nain	Luke 7:11-17
Quiets the storm	28 A.D.	Sea of Galilee	Matthew 8:23-27, Mark 4:35-41, Luke 8:22-25
John the Baptist beheaded by order of Herod	28 A.D.	Machaerus	Matthew 14:1-12, Mark 6:14-29, Luke 9:7-9
Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes – feeds 5000 men plus women and children with 5 loaves of bread and two fish.	29 A.D.	near Capernaum	Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:30-44, Luke 9:10-17, John 6:1-14
Walks on water	29 A.D.	Sea of Galilee	Matthew 14:22-23, Mark 6:45-52, John 6:16-21
The Transfiguration – Jesus' face shone like the sun	29 A.D.	Caesarea Philippi	Matthew 17:1-13, Mark 9:2-13, Luke 9:28-36
Raises Lazarus from the dead	29 A.D.	Bethany	John 11:1-44
Restores sight to two blind men	30 A.D.	Jericho	Matthew 20:29-34, Mark 10:46-52, Luke 18:35-43
Withdraws temporarily from public ministry with disciples because of threats to His life.	30 A.D.	Ephraim	John 11:54:57
Triumphal entry to Jerusalem (commemorated on Palm Sunday)	30 A.D., Sunday	Jerusalem	Matthew 21:1-11, Mark 11:1-10, Luke 19:29-44, John 12:12-19
The Last Supper	Thursday	Jerusalem	Matthew 26:17-29, Mark 14:12-25, Luke 22:7-20, John 13:1-38
Arrest, trial, and crucifixion (commemorated on Good Friday)	Friday, Passover Eve	Jerusalem	Matthew 26:47 - 27:66, Mark 14:43 - 15:47, Luke 22:47 - 23:56, John 18:2 - 19:42

Resurrection from the dead (commemorated on Easter Day)	Sunday	Jerusalem	Matthew 28:1-10, Mark 16:1-8, Luke 24:1-12, John 20:1-10
Appears to disciples	during following week	Jerusalem	Mark 16:14, Luke 24:36-43, John 20:19-25
Ascends to Heaven	40 days after resurrection	Mount of Olives, near Jerusalem	Matthew 28:16-20, Mark 16:19-20, Luke 24:44-53

Much of the above table abstracted from [Zondervan, pp. 719-720]

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