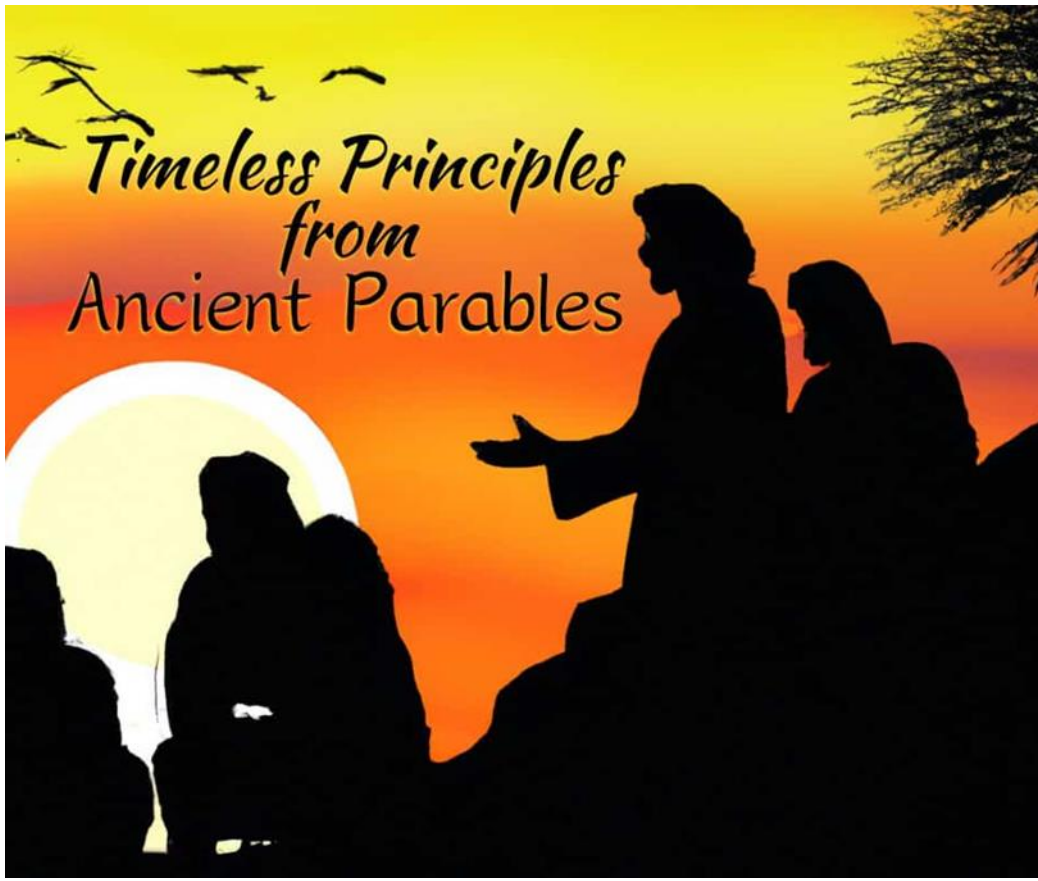


**Basic Training Bible Ministries**  
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# **Timeless Principles from Ancient Parables**

## **Introduction**

### **Kingdom Parables**

The parables of Jesus contained in the Gospels are some of the most loved, and yet least understood of His teachings. Historical studies show that some of the most fantastic teachings have been derived from a false understanding of these parables.

Furthermore, the number and variety of the parables of Jesus revealed Him to have a wisdom surpassing all the great minds of history. It has been noted in the teaching of great thinkers that one will seldom find any of them who told more than three to five parables that had any lasting effect. Yet, in the Gospels, we find at least sixty parables, along with what may be called “fragments” of others.

The parables Jesus told carry a much-overlooked indictment against the hardness of heart and unbelief of Israel, and indeed of all mankind. Every parable is a story that is true to life, something that any one of us could witness in our own experience. Yet, He invests them with spiritual truths that force the listeners to draw a conclusion resulting in their own accountability for the truth contained.

Since these stories and the spiritual truths they portray show events that happen around us all the time, we are forced to conclude that God has woven into the very fabric of the natural world Bible lessons for all to see, and for which each will give an account. As Paul states in Romans 1:20, this leaves every soul “*without excuse.*” This truth is stated in Proverbs 8:1–5, “*Does not wisdom cry out, and understanding lift up her voice? ... To you, O men, I call, and my voice is to the sons of men. O you simple ones, understand prudence, and you fools, be of an understanding heart.*” Everyday Bible lessons unfold around us, and we fail to read their meaning.

## **Interpretation**

It is critical to recognize that these are “Kingdom parables,” and not “Church parables.” They were spoken primarily to Israel—some only to His disciples—before the Church existed. They were spoken to people steeped in Old Testament understanding and living in an old culture. They must be interpreted in this light before the principles of the teaching are applied to the Church.

Since very early in the history of the Church, there have been two main schools of thought regarding the interpretation of the parables. The first, and probably most popular, was to approach the parables as allegories. This approach came from the Alexandrian school of interpretation in North Africa. Under this system, every element of the parable was given a meaning from somewhere else in Scripture. The more elaborate and ingenious the interpretation, the more popular it became.

The other school of interpretation was the simple, literal approach. This school was based in Antioch, where a much more enlightened and serious approach to Bible study flourished for over

three hundred years. This school took the parables for what they were—spiritual lessons from daily life.

Modern interpreters have opted for one or the other approach, but there have been additional new ideas—some beneficial and others detrimental. Following the rise of the critical approach to Scripture in the 1800's, some presumed “scholars” have taken it upon themselves to declare which words of the Gospels are actually from Jesus, and which are amendments by the human authors. Once you go down this road, you have left all conviction of divine inspiration behind, and what is and isn't true Scripture depends on the particular “scholar” you read or listen to. While some of the authors of this camp have very good insights into the meaning of the parables, I would caution anyone reading their works to disregard their comments on the validity of some, and the rejection of other, Scriptures. If we do not possess in our Bibles the inspired Word of God, that is, “*every word that proceeds from the mouth of God*” (Matt. 4:4), then we are indeed “*of all men most to be pitied*” (1 Cor. 15:19, NASB).

Another approach, and this taken by those holding to literal interpretation, is that the various elements of the parables are incidental, having no real significance and that every parable makes only one single point. However, in the two parables that Jesus interprets for us: the sower, and the wheat and tares (Matt. 13:3–9; 18–30; 36–43), we find that he calls attention to details, and gives to each a part in bringing forth the lessons intended.

A final note on interpretation has to do with the time and the setting of the parables. All were spoken in the historical and cultural context of Israel. Many of them were directed at the religious leaders of the nation, either as an apologetic for Jesus' ministry to sinners or as a rebuke for their hardness of heart. Others were presented to the population at large as an appeal to believe in Jesus as their Messiah. Therefore, we must find the interpretation of the parable within that context, and only after learning the truth intended by Jesus, can we then apply it in principle to the Church Age. As with all of the Scriptures, there is one intended interpretation, but many possible applications. We will be looking for the “timeless principles” that we can apply in this present age, for, as G.K. Chesterton has said, “*Principles are eternal, and like good soldiers, they stand fast.*”

One final example of the disastrous results of reading the Church into the parables is from those who interpret the three statements in Matthew concerning the “*outer darkness*” (Matt. 8:11–12; 22:13; 25:30) as relating to unfaithful Christians in the kingdom. First of all, this phrase occurs only in the Gospel of Matthew—a Gospel written to both reveal Jesus as Israel's Messiah, and to indict the nation for rejecting Him. Secondly, it is fully demonstrated, by authors such as Hebrew-Christian author and Oxford lecturer, Alfred Edersheim, that the phrase “*sons of the kingdom*” (Matt. 8:12; 13:38) was a term applied by the Jews to themselves in that day, and that “*outer darkness*” was in common use then as a synonym for Gehenna, or Hell (*The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, Volume 2*, Alfred Edersheim).

**My warning needs to be repeated:** Interpret the **parables** in light of the time and place in which they were spoken, and then we can apply the **principles** to the Church. We can be sure we are on solid ground in our interpretation when we find those same principles being applied in the Epistles.

### “Why do You speak to them in parables?”

This question, posed by Jesus’ closest disciples, and His answer to it (Matt. 13:10–15; Isa. 6:9–10), gives us a key to understanding the parables. Both John and Jesus had made a bona fide offer of the kingdom to Israel (Matt. 3:1–3; Mark 1:14–15; Luke 4:18–19). The key to the kingdom being established was their reception of Jesus as the promised Messiah/King (Isa. 28:16; Rom. 9:33). It was in response to their rejection of Him that Jesus began teaching in parables (read Matthew 12).

When the Jewish leadership, along with a majority of the people, rejected Jesus as Messiah, the kingdom program was put on hold. During this interim (the Church Age), God will use the Gentiles to both rebuke and provoke Israel (Rom. 10:19; Deut. 32:21). Now it will take the Tribulation Period, *“the time of Jacob’s trouble”* (Jer. 30:7), to bring the remnant of Israel to faith and salvation.

These parables were designed to hide the truth from those who had already hardened their hearts, and yet to reveal new truths to those who had *“ears to hear”* (Matt. 15; 13:9, 43; Mark 4:9, 23; 7:16; Luke 8:8; 14:35). Jesus gave the following warning to His disciples, *“Therefore take heed how you hear. For whoever has, to him more will be given; and whoever does not have, even what he seems to have will be taken from him”* (Luke 8:18).

His point is that those who hear with *“a noble and good heart”* (Luke 8:15), a receptive attitude of faith in the Teacher, will be given greater insight by the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:16–19; 3:16–19). For this, Paul prayed for all his students—and that includes us.

### The Parables Categorized

In these parables, we find a tension between the “kingdom present” and the “kingdom to come.” This tension is the result of the Jews’ rejection of Jesus as Messiah/King, and the delay of Jesus’ Messianic kingdom during the present Church Age. This was the **“mystery of the kingdom of heaven,”** which was newly revealed in Jesus’ parabolic ministry. The following division of the parables, of which we will only consider a few, is grouped around concepts that come from the parables themselves. A far better division has been done by Alfred Edersheim, based on the history of Jesus’ ministry (*The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, Volume 1*, Edersheim, pg. 578ff).

## **CLASS ONE**

### **The Crisis of the Kingdom**

The appearance of Jesus on the stage of Israel brought something new into the world. It was a shift from the kingdom prophesied to the kingdom presented in the Person of the King. Thus developed the crisis between the “old” and the “new,” with many rejecting the new and greater in favor of the old and familiar.

*“Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise. But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now.” Galatians 4:28–29*

When Jesus returned to Nazareth from His temptations in the wilderness, His first act of interpreting Scripture was to read Isaiah 61:1–2a and to declare Himself the fulfillment of that prophecy. This was a clear proclamation, in His first public lesson, that He was the Messiah.

He then began His itinerant ministry by saying, *“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel”* (Mark 2:15). At that stage of revelation, the *“Gospel”* to which He referred was *“the gospel of the kingdom”* (Matt. 4:23).

Then, beginning with the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus began to upend the flawed interpretations of the Law that had come down to Israel through unbelieving scribes and rabbis in the oral law. By these and many other acts Jesus declared Himself to be the turning point in the history of Israel.

By His coming into history, He had literally split time and began a new era. This created an inevitable state of “crisis” for the nation of Israel. Would they receive their long-prophesied King, and thus usher in the kingdom? Or by rejecting Him, would they consign Israel to rejection by Him, and end up in the dustbin of history? As we know (see Matt. 12), they chose the latter path. These parables tell of the crisis between the new and the old and contain the warning against choosing the old over the new.

### **The Parables**

#### **Fasting or Feasting; New Wine or Old Wineskins? (Mark 2:18–28)**

In these eleven verses, Jesus presents the disciples of John and the Pharisees with the dilemma of the new versus the old. John’s disciples were fasting, while those of Jesus were feasting. Jesus’ answer was that wedding parties don’t fast. Note that the disciples in this analogy are not the Bride (that is the Church, not yet formed—Matt. 16:18). Jesus is, of course, the Bridegroom, and they are celebrating in anticipation of the coming wedding feast (see the parable in Matt. 22:1–14), which the prophets said would inaugurate the kingdom (note Rev. 19:6–10).

To illustrate their dilemma, Jesus followed with a warning about the future absence of the Bridegroom (anticipating the Church Age), and the foolishness of putting new cloth on an old torn garment, by which *“the tear is made worse”* (v. 21). A further example is the folly of

putting new wine into old wineskins (v. 22). Here, the fermenting wine bursts the wineskins, and both wine and wineskins are lost.

When the Pharisees criticized His disciples for plucking grain on the Sabbath, He silenced them by using David, whom they honored with their lips, who in his flight from Saul ate the consecrated bread (Mark 2:22–27; 1 Sam. 21:1–6). The final argument, however, was His proclamation that “*Therefore, the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath*” (v. 28). Using the title given Him by the prophet Daniel (Dan. 7:13–14), He once again declared His identity as the Messiah of Israel. This is also a direct claim of His deity, since “*the Lord of the Sabbath*” could only be the God who gave the Sabbath.

It is critical to remember that Jesus never said that the new does away with the old. He did not come to destroy the Law and the prophets, but rather to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17). This coming Age of Grace was the necessary counterpart and conclusion to the Age of the Law.

That Jesus intended His disciples to “*rightly divide the word of truth*” (2 Tim. 2:15) is shown by His instructions to the disciples when He asked them if they understood His parables. He said, “*Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old.*” (Matt. 13:52).

### **The Sower, the Soils, and the Tares (Matt. 13:1–8, 18–30, 36–43)**

We need not spend a great deal of time on these two, other than to summarize their main points. In the first, Jesus makes it clear that the good seed of God’s Word can only work in the soul (soil) that is receptive and conducive to fruit-bearing. While many pastors and students love to argue which of the four soils represents the true believer, that is a distraction from the very crucial point Jesus was making. Every parable brings the hearer to a point of decision. In this one, the question that should follow the hearing of it is, “What kind of soil am I?” This should be followed by the requisite actions to cease being like the first three and to become like the good soil. The reaction of the people to the parables was dependent on their attitude to Jesus. If they rejected His claims to be the Messiah, they were doomed to miss the meaning of the parable. Isn’t it amazing that Jesus’ parabolic teaching was received wholeheartedly by the Samaritans, because they immediately concluded, within just two short days, “*We know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world*” (see John 4:40–42).

In the second parable above, Jesus made it clear that while the good seed of God’s Word is being sown, the devil is also busy sowing false doctrine to deceive the souls of those who reject the truth (2 Cor. 4:1–6). It is often difficult to distinguish the “*wheat*” from the “*tares.*” While we can make some basic determination based on visible conduct (Matt. 7:15–20; 18:15–17), the final judgment belongs to Jesus Christ when He comes back to Earth (Matt. 3:11–12). We will see this theme of judgment and separation of the righteous believers from the unrighteous unbelievers in the parables that follow.

## The Principles

### **The Law and Grace; Truth versus Deception (Gal. 3:21–26; Rom. 8:1–4)**

It took the Damascus Road revelation to open the eyes of Saul of Tarsus and deliver him from the blindness of his fanatical Pharisee-ism (Acts 9; Phil. 3:1–7). It was to him that God revealed the interconnection between the Age of Law and that of Grace. In Galatians 3:15–29 and 4:21–26, Paul shows that the Law was a necessary prelude to the Gospel of grace, just as the “bad news” of our condemnation under sin is essential to bring us to the “good news” of forgiveness and reconciliation by faith in Christ (Rom. 3:23–24; 6:23).

Then, in Romans, after demonstrating the inability of the Law to conquer sin in our lives (Rom. 7), Paul declares the victory of grace (Rom. 8:1–4), as a result of regeneration. What the Law could never do, God has done through Christ. By the cross, the penalty of sin was forever paid, and all who believe in Jesus Christ are spiritually reborn (John 3:3, 7) and are justified forever! This amazing transaction is summarized as follows ...

*“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”* Romans 3:23–24

*“For He [God the Father] made Him [Jesus Christ] who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”* 2 Corinthians 5:21

Therefore, the “good seed” of the Gospel must be sown, knowing that some will believe, and others will reject its glorious truth. Among those who believe, there will be many who become distracted by the world, the flesh, and the devil, as illustrated by the Parable of the Sower. But the good soil makes the labor of the ministry well worthwhile.

Also, in the Church, there will always be those who say “*Lord, Lord*” (Matt. 7:22; Luke 6:46), but give no evidence of regeneration in their lives. It is not for us to determine their standing with the Lord. We continue to labor, knowing that Jesus will make the final judgment. We must, however, identify those who teach false doctrine (2 Cor. 11:4; Gal. 1:8–9), and resist them with the truth. This is the age-old battle of the ministry.

## Conclusion

Freedom from the Law does not make us lawless (Titus 2:11–15). Rather, with the indwelling of the Spirit of God, we now can fulfill the Law in its purest form—that of loving God and our neighbor—which is the highest fulfillment of the Law (Matt. 22:36–40; Luke 10:25–28; Rom. 13:8–10). Jesus’ parables call us to make a decision, first to believe in Him, and then to obey His Word and bear “*much fruit*” (John 15:1–10). False teachers often use the Law to confuse and deceive their listeners (Col. 2:16–19; 1 Tim. 1:6–11). The Law could reveal the holiness of God, and the sinfulness of man, but could not provide salvation. Even in the Old Testament, salvation was always by grace through faith (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:3).

## **CLASS TWO**

### **The Mystery of the Kingdom**

In the New Testament, “mystery” is used for truths previously unknown, but which have now been revealed. Jesus Himself was the new and full revelation of God to men (John 1:1–18; Heb. 1:1–3). Because of the mixture of human traditions and false teaching, many chose to reject Jesus’ new revelation in favor of their “traditions” (Matt. 15:1–6; Mark 7:1–13). In these kingdom parables, Jesus is revealing new truths that fulfill the old.

*“In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins ... having made known to us the mystery of His will ... that in the dispensation of the fullness of times He might gather together in one all things in Christ.”* Ephesians 1:7, 9, 10

We have seen in our first study how difficult it was for the Jews of Jesus’ day to accept His ministry. He seemed to many of them to be “turning the world upside down,” when in fact He was working to set it right, by His ministry and His sacrifice on the cross. As Peter said when he preached to the house of Cornelius ...

*“How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him.”* Acts 10:38

But that Jesus brought something entirely new into the world no one could deny. This was obvious when He began teaching “*the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven*” (Matt. 13:11). Even the greatest of all the prophets, John the Baptizer, was temporarily confused and in doubt.

### **The Parables**

This first parable was given after John sent word from prison, asking for assurance regarding Jesus’ identity. Jesus’ answer was based on the prophecy of Isaiah 61:1–3, which Jesus had commented on in Nazareth at the beginning of His ministry (Luke 4:18–19). Jesus’ estimate of John as a prophet is given in Matthew 11:7–1 and Luke 24–28 (see also Mal. 3:1).

#### **The Children at Play (Matt. 11:16–19; Luke 7:31–33)**

That Jesus loved and welcomed children into His embrace is well known (Matt. 18:1–4; 19:13–15). Even His parables about the birds and flowers reveal to us that Jesus never lost the wonder of childhood (Matt. 6:25–33). Tragically, for most of us, “*we buy knowledge at the price of innocence*” (*The Parables of Jesus*, George A. Buttrick, Harper and Row, 1928).

But Jesus was not blind also to the fickleness and intractable nature of children either. Here, the children in the parable represent the Jewish leaders (Luke 7:30). They called John demonic for his ascetic lifestyle, but then accused Jesus of being a drunkard and glutton for feasting with the common people. In other words, they were implacable of soul, impossible to satisfy. Their nature was not childlike, but rather childish.



To them, the ministry of John, with all its aura of an Old Testament prophet, was like a funeral dirge. Yet, “*you did not mourn,*” Jesus said. In His first message, The Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had said, “*Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted*” (Matt. 5:4). But in the incremental stages of the Beatitudes, this condition followed, “*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*” (Matt. 5:3). Poverty of spirit is the last thing the Pharisees, in their religious arrogance, would have any use for.

In fact, “*the burning and shining lamp*” was John (John 5:35) who had only incited them more against the truths of God. Their opposition to him and Jesus was an assault of violence against the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt. 11:12). It was through their fierce opposition that the people had to fight through and like “*the violent take it by force*” (Matt. 11:12).

Then, “*you did not dance*” (reversing the order to fit the time of their respective ministries), indicated their offense at Jesus, the “*friend of sinners*” (Matt. 11:19; Luke 7:34; see also Matt. 9:10–11; Mark 2:16–17; Luke 15:1–2). It is most interesting that Jesus uses the analogy of children trying to engage their playmates in a game, without success. Both He and John had sought to bring these same religious leaders into the fruits of their labors, without success.

Jesus had already described His very presence among them as a wedding feast (Matt. 9:15), but they, whose hearts were hardened and whose spirits were cold as the grace, could not celebrate His coming!

Jesus’ concluding words were an affirmation of His love for the common people, and His estimation of their spiritual stature, as opposed to the religious leaders, “*Wisdom is justified [vindicated or declared right] by her children.*” This is a Hebraism, a figure of speech that says, that those who are born of the truth are living evidence of the truth. We could say, the children reflect their father. Tragically, the religious leaders of Israel were among the “*sons of disobedience ... children of wrath*” (Eph. 2:2–3).

### **The Wise and Foolish Builders (Matt. 7:24–27; Luke 6:46–49)**

In the little poem, “*A Bag of Tools,*” by R.L. Sharpe, the ending reads,

*“And each must make, ere life has flown  
A stumbling block or a stepping stone.”*

Of the two passages above that contain this parable, we will look at Matthew because he includes something Luke omits, due to their different audiences (Matthew wrote specifically to the Jews, Luke to the Gentiles).

Like so many of Jesus’ sayings (see Matt. 5:3 with Psalm 37:11), this parable is an echo of the words of the prophets. In Ezekiel 13:10–11 we read of the doom that will fall on the false prophets and those deceived by them ...

*“Because, indeed, because they have seduced my people, saying, ‘Peace!’ when  
there is no peace—and one builds a wall, and they plaster it with untempered*

*mortar, that it will fall. There will be flooding rain, and you, O great hailstones, shall fall; and a stormy wind shall tear it down.” Ezekiel 13:10–11*

It is crucial to take note of the contrast, rather than the similarities, of the two builders. Both of them heard the words of Jesus, both of them built on what they heard, and both of their works faced the test of the storm. The vital contrast is found in the contrasting phrases, “*whoever hears these sayings ... and does them ... who hears these sayings ... and does not do them*”(Matt. 7:24–27)

We are immediately reminded of the warning of James, “*But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves*” (James 1:22). Just as in the parable of the sower and the soils, the evidence of true “hearing” was found in the resulting fruits. And it is at just this very point that so many Bible teachers go astray. They immediately launch into a tirade about doing “good works,” saying in effect at the end of the sermon: Now you have heard, go out and do it! Yet, they have missed the most vital “to do” on Jesus' list.

In John Chapter 6, Jesus was asked, “*What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?*” His answer was, “*This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.*” (John 6:28–29). Without the first work, the work of faith in Him as the source of the Word, all our doing will be in vain. Every time Jesus said, “*He who has ears let him hear*” (Matt. 11:15; 13:9; Mark 4:9, etc.), He was separating those who heard with ears of faith and those who only heard.

This is because, while the hearing and the building of the two hearers in the parable are the same, Jesus is laying His emphasis on the different foundations. One built “*on the rock*”, and the other “*on the sand.*” As Jesus would declare to the disciples later, “*On this rock I will build My church*” (Matt. 16:18). Contrary to some popular teaching, it is not Peter that is the rock. Rather, it is his confession, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*” (Matt. 16:16).

The hearing of faith hears that “*still small voice*” (1 Kings 19:12) of the Holy Spirit within the Word, saying, “*This is the way, walk in it*” (Isa. 30:21). It is not an accident that the Christian life is likened to a journey, and that walking is the method of travel. But, before we start on a journey, it is a good idea to know “*the way*” (John 14:6), and Jesus is known only by the simple faith of a child (Matt. 18:1–3). In any endeavor of the spiritual life, our building must be on the sure foundation of faith in the Person and Work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Only then can our building stand.

### **The Principles**

When the Apostle Paul said, “*For we walk by faith, not by sight*” (2 Cor. 5:7), he captured the essence of the Christian life. He could just as easily and truthfully said, “for we walk by faith, and not by might,” for the contrast he was making was between the spiritual and the physical realm.

It is true, as stated above, that James challenges us to be doers of the Word, and not hearers only. However, before that advice, he speaks of enduring temptations with joy (James 1:2), and that, to

do this, we must pray for wisdom (vv. 5–8). It is critical to the understanding of the whole book of James to get the point made in those verses that we must “*ask in faith, with no doubting*” (v. 6). He makes it clear that without sure and stable faith in the Lord, nothing will be given to us.

The wise builder is more concerned with the foundation than the building. When Paul declares that “*faith [is] working through love*” (Gal. 5:6), he has opened the door to a rich treasure, sadly missed by many Christians. Such love as he speaks of is beyond our power to produce. It can only come by the enabling ministry of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23). And how are we filled with the power of the Holy Spirit? It was in just the same way that we were indwelt and sealed by Him.

*“In Him you also, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise.”* Ephesians 1:13

The Gospel was heard, then it was believed, and this unleashed the infinite power of the Spirit of God in our souls. This process never ends, whether we are talking about spiritual growth or production.

*“For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.”* 1 Corinthians 3:11

The context of this verse is all about reward in eternity at the Bema Seat of Jesus Christ. Yet, Paul is careful to remind us that it is only work done on this foundation that will be rewarded. The method is always God’s Word heard, received in faith, and then applied to life. Paul gives a clear and simple summary of the fruitful life in Colossians 2:6.

*“As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him.”*

### **CLASS THREE**

#### **The Character of the Kingdom**

The Old Testament prophets had presented the coming King as both a Suffering Servant and as a Conquering Hero. Naturally, most Jews preferred the Hero version. They did not understand that before Christ could come in His glory (His second advent—Rev. 19:1–16), He first had to come as a Servant to all mankind and die for our sins on the cross (Mark 10:45; Luke 22:27; Phil. 2:5–9). The character of the kingdom derives from the character of the King! These parables tell of His humble and compassionate nature.

*“Take My yoke and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”* Matthew 11:29

*“Tell the daughter of Zion, ‘Behold, your King is coming to you, lowly, and sitting on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey.’” Matthew 21:5 (see Zechariah 9:9)*

## **The Parables**

In the parables that follow, Jesus seeks to instill in His listeners the mindset that is fundamental to all spiritual life—the attitude of humility.

### **The Chief Seats (Luke 14:1, 7–11)**

The setting for the parable is found in verse one. A “ruler” of the Pharisees invited Jesus to a meal. In most cases like this, the invitation was not cordial. Rather, they watched Him to find a reason to accuse Him (see Luke 7:36, 39, 45–46).

Jesus sees the scramble of the guests for the places of honor. These were the seats closest to the host, the guests being seated at a “U” shaped table, with the host at the bottom, and the guests arrayed on each side.

Again, we see Jesus’ mastery of the Old Testament, as He captures the thought from Proverbs 25:5–6 and applies it to the moment.

*“Do not exalt yourself in the presence of the King. And do not stand in the place of the great; for it is better that he say to you, ‘Come up here,’ than that you should be put lower in the presence of the prince, whom your eyes have seen.”*

We can easily relate the story of Haman in the book of Esther, who exalted himself before the king and wound up hanging on his own gallows (Esther 6–7).

We also recognize in this story an echo of the Beatitudes, when Jesus said, *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven ... Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth”* (Matt. 5:3, 5).

The summary that Jesus gives to this little parable is explosive in its finality.

*“For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”* Luke 14:11

Take note that the “*whoever*” encompasses the multitude, and the “*he*” singles out the solitary individual. Some have suggested that to be “meek and humble” is to be a doormat to the world. Others scoff at Jesus’ commendation of meekness in the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:5), asking, “When have the meek ever inherited anything in this world.” The problem is that they are looking at time, and Jesus had His eye fixed on eternity.

George Buttrick has written, *“Someone has suggested that the Beatitudes, because they prescribe an unobtrusive virtue, would not furnish in actual character any materials for a thrilling biography. The retort is obvious: The Beatitudes once became incarnate, and the resultant Biography is the most thrilling known to men.”* (*The Parables of Jesus*, Buttrick, pg. 85).

### **The Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18:9–14)**

This parable is connected in the context with the previous one, about the unjust judge (Luke 18:1–8), because they both relate to the practice of prayer. We will look at the former one in a later study.

That both went up at the same time may indicate that this was at the prescribed times for prayer. It also reminds us of Jesus' words, "*My house shall be called a house of prayer*" (Matt. 21:13; Mark 11:17; see also Isa. 56:7; and Jer. 7:11). The Pharisee in this represents all that is the opposite of humility. It is significant that "*He prayed ... with himself*" (v. 11). His prayer got no higher than the ceiling. The he gives thanks, his words ring hollow, because thanksgiving implies the reception of a gift, and a true gift is undeserved.

The opposite of humility is self-righteousness. It is an attitude that combines both an inflated opinion of self and a withering contempt of others. After he goes through a roster of sins, each sinking lower, he places "*this tax collector*" (v. 11) at the bottom of the list. He then turns His attention on himself, and all his assumed virtues. Pharisees fasted on Mondays and Thursdays, because it was believed that Moses went up on Mount Sinai on the first and came back down on the second. The Pharisees were meticulous in their tithing, as was recognized by Jesus, who condemned them for elevating this practice even above "*the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy and faith*" (Matt. 23:23). Alfred Edersheim has collected similar prayers of self-praise recorded by the Jewish rabbis (*The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, Vol. 2*, Edersheim, pg. 291).

Meanwhile, the publican (tax collector) stands "*afar off*" (v. 13) knowing he is scorned and held in contempt by the Pharisee. He dares not to even look up to Heaven. He has nothing to commend himself to God for but stands before Him in conscious need. In the misery he feels at being such a sinner, he can only cry out to God for mercy. The use of the definite article in the Greek makes his cry, "*God, be merciful to me, a [the] sinner.*" In his mind, as with the Apostle Paul, he was the chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15).

But where the Pharisee declared himself to be righteous, the Lord Jesus Christ declared the tax collector to be righteous, for this is what justification before God means.

*"Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness."*

Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3; Galatians 3:6

Again, Jesus concludes the parable with a summary intended to echo in the hearts of all who have ears to hear. "*Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted*" (v. 14)—a saying He must have used often (Matt. 23:12; Luke 14:11).

### **The Principles**

Humility and compassion were the essence of Jesus' life and ministry.

*"Learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart."* Matthew 11:29

*“Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve,  
and to give His life a ransom for many.” Matthew 20:28*

Besides His self-sacrifice on the cross, no greater example of His humble nature could be found than when, on the very night of His betrayal, He girded Himself with the towel of the lowliest servant and washed the feet of the disciples (John 13:1–5).

His entire life was marked by unwavering love for the heavenly Father and for sinful men. Having been saved *“by grace through faith”* (Eph. 2:8), we are challenged to model our lives after Him.

*“Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.” 1 Corinthians 11:1*

This was no empty challenge on his part. The Apostle Paul brings us face to face with the essence of this high standard in Philippians 2:5–9, and then presents his own life-long pursuit of that ideal in Philippians 3:7–14. The qualities of humility, compassion, and service to which we are called are beyond human ability to perform. However, by the indwelling of the Spirit of God, the inculcation of God’s Word, and steady spiritual growth, the model will be attained to a greater or lesser degree.

It is in the hope of attaining these three qualities mentioned above that Paul builds his practical theology on *“faith, hope, love, these three”* (1 Cor. 13:13; see also Rom. 5:1–5; Col. 1:4–5; 1 Thess. 1:3; 5:8). Faith in response to the Word of God will always result in humility. The hope of eternal life cannot fail to produce compassion for the lost. And the love of God, poured out by His Spirit, will compel us to serve Him by serving others.

*“For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died [were spiritually dead], and He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.” 2 Corinthians 5:14–15*

#### **CLASS FOUR** **Entrance into the Kingdom**

The common perception, as taught by the Scribes was that all Jews, who were not out-and-out sinners, would enter into the promised kingdom by virtue of being sons and daughters of Abraham. They actually believed that the merits of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob assured them of a place in Paradise. The Pharisees, however, stressed that salvation was the result of intense devotion and scrupulous keeping of the Law of Moses. When Jesus came preaching the forgiveness of sins based on faith alone, they considered this to be “cheap grace” and “easy believe-ism,” just as many do today. These parables speak of the infinite grace and mercy of God.

*“He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name.” John 1:11–12*

## **The Parables**

In the following parables, Jesus reveals the infinite love and compassion of God. He shows that while the initiative in salvation is always from God, there is a necessary response on the part of men, that of humble and childlike faith.

### **Three Lost Things (Luke 15:1–32)**

*“For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.”  
Luke 19:10*

Jesus gave these three parables in response to the criticism of the Pharisees (vv. 1–2). In this light, it is worth noticing certain similarities and contrasts in these parables. In the first two, He defends His mission and ministry to the lost. In the parable we call “the prodigal son,” He actually condemns the Pharisees, in the person of the elder son, for their attitude of arrogant self-righteousness.

In the first two, the lost sheep and the lost coin, there is an appeal to the Pharisees to see what they would do in similar situations (see Luke 14:5). In the last of the three, He attempts to show them what their attitude looks like, by contrasting the joyful reception of the father with the grumbling resentment of the elder son.

It is worth pointing out that in each case what was lost was the rightful possession of the searcher—whether of the shepherd, the woman, or the father. All mankind, having been created by God, are His rightful possession. All, due to the sin of Adam, are lost, yet He desires their recovery and safe arrival in His heavenly kingdom (1 Tim. 2:4–6; 2 Pet. 3:9).

In commenting on these parables in his book, *The Parables of Jesus*, George Buttrick makes a valuable point. It is easy for us to think of God in terms of power, infinite intelligence, or authority. It is most difficult for us to see Him as Jesus portrays Him here, in the anxious search of love for that precious soul that is lost. We can picture Him in frowning disapproval, but how hard it is to picture God in joyful celebration with the angels over one sinner who repents and returns.

The sheep was lost by wandering, the coin lost by carelessness, and the son by willfulness. The lost sheep was helpless, the lost coin was useless, and the lost son was homeless. The lost sheep represented a small portion of the flock, the coin—ten percent, but the son was worth more than all that the father owned! In the first two stories, the words “*lost*” and “*found*” are what stand out. In the last parable, it begins with “*give me,*” a demand for what is his right (though the request before the father’s death was a major insult), but in the end, it is “I am not worthy,” and all that is restored to him he knows he does not deserve and would not dare ask for.

Yet, the purpose of the final parable is not focused so much on the prodigal, it is the contrast between the loving reception of the father, versus the arrogant refusal of the elder son to join in the celebration. And it is here that we see the true depths of the love and compassion of Jesus. For the pleading of the father with the elder son, is in reality Jesus pleading with the Pharisees to drop their judgmental attitude to the ones they called “sinners,” and to join in the glad and joyous celebration of their rescue and recovery.

### **The Two Debtors (Luke 7:40–50)**

Again, we find Jesus dining in the home of a Pharisee, this one named Simon. The story is familiar enough to most of us, but in familiarity too often we overlook what is vital.

The Pharisee obviously did not think much of Jesus, as seen by his dismissive attitude to even the most basic of courtesies (vv. 44–46). His invitation was probably just to find some fault in Jesus. The arrival of the sinful woman gave him just what he was looking for.

Though historically this woman is commonly identified as Mary of Magdala (Mark 15:40; 16:9–10; Luke 8:1–3; John 20:14–17), there is no biblical evidence for this. More likely, she is identified for us by John as having anointed the feet of Jesus twice (John 11:1–2; 12:3–8). Her actions indicate that she had met with Jesus some time previously and had been assured of her forgiveness. It was in response to this that she appeared in the house of Simon.

Her tears were tears of repentance and gratitude. The letting down of her hair, which that culture considered immodest to say the least, was a statement of abject humility. She used her natural glory (1 Cor. 11:15) to wipe the dust from the feet of our Lord. All the while, she continued to kiss the Savior’s feet in gratitude and adoration. The customary courtesies that Simon had rudely neglected in receiving Jesus into his home, Mary had more than made up for!

The parable of the two debtors had two designs. The first was to force Simon to make an objective judgment about loving gratitude. This one was easy, though it appears Simon sensed a trap, for he said, *“I suppose the one whom he forgave more”* (v. 43). Then Jesus released the trap, *“You have rightly judged.”* Simon did not realize he had just judged himself. And this was the second purpose, for Simon to draw a subjective conclusion, that he was the one who thought he had little to forgive. *“To whom little is forgiven, the same loves little”* (v. 45). In Simon’s case, for one who thought he had nothing to forgive, there was no gratitude nor love.

The closing words of Jesus to the woman are the essence of the Gospel. *“Your sins”* (v. 48) reminds us that we all are sinners before a holy God (Rom. 3:23). *“Are forgiven”* declares that they are not ignored or overlooked. The Lord Jesus Christ on the cross paid the brutal price of forgiveness. Only those who are like Simon could ever speak of “cheap grace” or “easy believism.” *“Your faith has saved you”* (v. 50) is the consistent message of Scripture. But it needs to be said that faith must have an object worthy of the result. Only faith in the Person and work of Jesus Christ can bring the gift of eternal life. And finally, *“Go in peace”* is literally, “Go into peace.” She was now entering into a new relationship with God, as a new creature in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), in an environment of perpetual peace called reconciliation. As Paul put it so well:



*“Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access through faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”*

Romans 5:1–2

## **The Principles**

The central idea in the parables above is the joy—both in Heaven and on Earth—of the lost being found, of the sinner being saved. The love of God toward sinners is the source of His grace and mercy. Like the lost sheep and the lost coin, the sinner can do nothing to save himself. But like the prodigal son and the sinful woman, there must be a response on the part of the lost to that offer of grace, mercy, and forgiveness. All of this is beautifully portrayed in Ephesians 2:1–10, where Paul contrasts what we once were without Christ, and who we are now by faith in Him.

### **What We Were (Eph. 2:1–3)**

We see the hopeless condition of the lost soul in vv. 1–3. There are four conditions set down by Paul here that describe the condition of the lost soul. First, we were dead. This is a reference to spiritual death and separation of the soul from God. This death began in the garden (Gen. 2:17; 3:1–8) and is passed down to every member of the human race (Rom. 5:12). Like the lost sheep, we had all gone astray (Isa. 53:6).

Second, we were slaves of the devil, *“the prince of the power of the air.”* When he says we *“walked according to the course of this world,”* the point is that we were under the power of it. The devil rules the course of this world, to which we were enslaved. Like the lost coin, our intrinsic value was useless in the dust and debris of this world.

Third, we were *“sons of disobedience.”* This is a Hebraism, meaning that the children reflect the parent. The disobedience here is that of unbelief since both words come from the same root word. Jesus clearly stated that the first act of obedience to God was to believe in Him (John 6:28–29). Here, we can relate the actions of the prodigal, who was lost from willful disobedience.

Fourth, we were *“children of wrath.”* Jesus said of those who refused to believe in Him, *“He who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”* (John 3:36). As in the parable of the lost sheep, it was the searching of the shepherd that made all the difference. Paul now turns to what God has done.

### **What God Has Done (Eph. 2:4–7)**

In these verses, the infinite love of God is seen as the fountain of His mercy and grace. Mercy is the work of God in removing from us what we rightly deserve. Grace is the opposite side of the coin, in that grace supplies us with all that we do not deserve. When we hear and receive the truth of the Gospel (Eph. 1:13–14), all of God’s gifts of mercy and grace are ours (Eph. 1:3). The emphasis of this passage is on three of these works.

First, God *“made us alive together with Christ.”* This means that at the moment of salvation, we share in the resurrection life of our Lord. Paul adds the parenthetical in v. 5, *“by grace you have*

*been saved*” so that when he states it again in v. 8, we will link it to the three things God has done for us in Christ.

Second, God “*raised us up together*” with Christ. Not only are we made alive, but we are raised up to the heavenly plane. We are no longer of this world; we live with our feet on this earth, but our souls are in Heaven. This is strong evidence of our eternal security, but Paul is not done yet.

Third, God “*made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.*” We could no more be “unseated” than Christ Himself. In Colossians 3:1–3 Paul pictures us as God’s treasure, hidden in Christ for a future unveiling. The wonderful **mystery** is that Jesus Christ indwells us by His Spirit (John 14:16–18), while we are also “in Him” in the heavenly realm. Our spiritual union is eternal and unbreakable. In v. 7 Paul says that God’s riches of grace and kindness will be unfolded throughout all the ages to come!

### **What We Are Now (Eph. 2:8–10)**

The result of God’s gracious undertaking for us through Christ is what we call “salvation.” Few believers, however, fully understand either the scope or the purpose of that salvation. It has been said, by various Bible teachers, that in the first three chapters of Ephesians, there are between 30 to 40 new possessions of every believer. These are summarized in the third verse of chapter one as “*every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.*” Neither time nor space allows a full accounting of these provisions here. In the verses before us, we can take note of three things specifically.

First, Paul says that “we are saved by faith, apart from works.” There is nothing in our salvation that is the result of any work or merit on our part. Salvation is a free gift of God (Rom. 6:23), which can only be received by faith alone in Christ alone. This salvation by grace removes any basis for boasting, either before or after salvation.

Second, he reminds us that we are God’s “*workmanship*” (v. 10). The word used here is *poema*, from which we get poem. The word carries a much greater connotation, however, being likened to “a work of art” (*Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*). Not only is every believer a unique new creation (2 Cor. 5:17) but each one is given unique spiritual gifts and abilities (Rom. 12:3–8; 1 Cor. 12:7; Eph. 4:1–6). Every believer is an important stone in the spiritual temple of God (1 Pet. 2:5–10) and has a role to play within that spiritual family. The discovery of these marvelous spiritual entitlements comes through consistent spiritual growth under sound Bible teaching and in personal prayer and service. This leads us to the next point.

Finally, we are not only His workmanship, we are also to be His workmen. The phrase, “*that we should walk in them*” (v. 10) refers back to the “*good works*” that God has prepared for us to do. This introduces the idea of the spiritual journey called the Christian walk. Paul goes into great detail on this topic, beginning in chapter four. I would encourage all readers to make a list of this “walk in good works” (and in one section, how not to walk) by looking up the following passages: Ephesians 4:1, 17; and 5:1–2, 8–9; 15–16.

As was illustrated by Mary's lavish gratitude, and the parable of the two debtors, the degree of dedication and service in any Christian's life will be a good indicator of just how much they think they have been forgiven, and of how truly grateful they are for the gift of eternal life.

## **CLASS FIVE**

### **Privilege and Duty in the Kingdom**

As simple as it is to enter eternal life, even as "*little children*" (Matt. 18:1–4), this is not the same as the cost of discipleship. Even in the two invitations of Jesus (Matt. 11:28–30), we see the simplicity of receiving the gift of eternal "*rest*," and the cost of finding rest as a disciple. As Billy Graham said, "*Salvation is free, but discipleship costs everything we have.*" This statement is true to Jesus' teaching.

*"So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be  
My disciple."* Luke 14:33

Many of Jesus' parables, especially those spoken to His disciples, speak of the need to "*count the cost*" (Luke 14:28). The cost of discipleship was certainly understood and applied by the Apostle Paul.

*"But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ."*  
Philippians 3:7

### **The Parables**

In developing the idea of discipleship, we will briefly look at four parables. These speak of the value of the kingdom, the privileges of its citizens, and the accountability for those assets of blessing.

#### **The Treasure and the Pearl (Matt. 13:44–46)**

It is critical to note here that the audience to whom Jesus is speaking has changed. At the beginning, he was speaking to the multitude (Matt. 13:2). Then, He sent the multitude away (vv. 34–36). After that, He explained the Parable of the Tares to the disciples. The three parables that followed this were for the disciples only. Here, we learn the value and the cost of discipleship.

The twin Parables of the Treasure and the Pearl are not teaching about the way of salvation. We do not "give up all we have" in order to be saved. Those who teach such things are greatly confused regarding the message of the Gospel and the workings of God. Until one's soul is newly created by regeneration and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, giving up anything is only a temporary housecleaning which prepares for an even greater evil to take its place (the Parable of the Empty House—Matt. 12:43–45; Luke 11:24–26).

The point of both these parables is the surpassing value of the Kingdom of Heaven. In both, the joy of discovery results in a parting with all they possess to gain the object of desire. In the first,

the treasure is found by stumbling on it. In the second, it is due to diligent search. Different people come to Christ in different ways: some come searching, while others come stumbling. Neither affects the value of the discovery.

When the rich young ruler came to Jesus, he asked what he might “*do that I may have eternal life*” (Matt. 19:16; Mark 10:17). He had no sense of guilt for sin, nor need for repentance. When Jesus said, in response to his greeting, “*Why do you call Me good? No one is good but one, that is, God*” (Matt. 19:17; Mark 10:18). The real question to the young man was this, “Do you believe that I am God?” Jesus put the issue of faith to him first, then dealt with his misconception. In essence, Jesus responded, keep the whole Law, and you can enter eternal life. In arrogance, the young man claimed that he had. Jesus then unerringly put His finger on the tenth commandment, which has to do with greed and coveting. The turning away of the young man showed both his unbelief and his unwillingness to become Jesus’ disciple. Had the young man been willing to follow Jesus, he would have come to know Him as the Son of God (Matt. 16:18).

In summary, there are those who come to Jesus Christ seeking (Jer. 29:13), and there are those who do not seek who are found by Him (Isa. 65:1; Rom. 10:20). Once the treasure is found, the question is, what is it worth to you? The dedication of one’s discipleship will answer the question.

#### **The Talents and the Mina’s (pounds) (Matt. 25:14–30; Luke 19:11–27)**

In these parables, we are warned of our future accountability. Note that Jesus says, “*to each according to his own ability*” (Matt. 25:15), and “*to each his [own] work*” (Mark 13:34). These parables of the talents, and the minas (or pounds) were spoken to the people of Israel. The phrases quoted above remind us that the firstborn male was consecrated to the Lord (Exod. 13:1), but every male in Israel was to become a son of the covenant and a partaker “*of the commonwealth of Israel*” (Eph. 2:12).

It must be stressed that all men in Israel were considered to be “*sons of the kingdom*” (Matt. 8:12). To each an interest in the covenant-relation to God belonged, some to a greater degree (kings, prophets, scribes, etc.) and others to a lesser degree. It is in this context that these parables must first be understood, or gross misinterpretation and false teaching will result.

The challenge of both parables is to see that the gifts and blessings God had given were not scorned. All that the Master gave to His servants was to be used for His honor. The conclusion was that those who faithfully served would be rewarded with greater work in the kingdom yet to come.

The unfaithful servant does not represent an unfaithful believer who loses their salvation. Such an interpretation is contrary to the whole teaching of the Bible. Rather, he is a Jewish unbeliever, who neither knew his Master, nor valued the gifts and privileges he had been given. Like the ejected wedding guest (Matt. 22:13), he represents the fate of the unsaved in the day of judgment.

### **The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37)**

To rightly serve God, we must reach out and expend ourselves for those in need. This parable has had many fanciful allegories spun around it. I will not entertain them here. It is a simple story, told to one who asked the question to test Jesus. In the end, Jesus is testing him! From the lawyer's first question, "*What shall I do to inherit eternal life?*" so reminiscent of the rich young ruler, to his second question, "*And who is my neighbor?*" (v. 29). Jesus will, in the end, change it to the unspoken question, "Whose neighbor are you?" For Jesus, through the story, changes the issue from the intended "How do I keep the law?" to the much more critical, "How do I show love to God?"

The only conclusion to this charming and most-loved story is that those who follow Jesus Christ are to be a neighbor to all who are in need. As Stuart Briscoe (*Parables of Luke—Patterns for Power*, D. Stuart Briscoe, Regal Books, 1979) said, "*Your neighbor is the man in the ditch.*" While the greatest need is always the salvation of the soul, we cannot ignore the many other needs that plague all mankind. We are to do what we can, with what we have, as much as we are able.

As a final note, the Samaritan in the story, when he saw the wounded man, "*had compassion on him*" (v. 33). This is the expression of the very soul of the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 9:36). The absence of this motive makes a mockery of any ministry and reveals the absence of the working of the Spirit of God (Rom. 13:8–10; Gal. 5:22).

### **The Prayer of Persistence (Luke 18:1–8)**

The parables cited above ought to remind us of our frailty and drive us to persistent prayer. This parable was given "*That men always ought to pray and not lose heart*" (Luke 18:1). Jesus knew that we would often become discouraged when it seemed our prayers were not being answered. He also knew that when the answer to our prayers is "no" or "not yet" it is because a wise heavenly Father is answering in the best possible way.

In v. 5, the word translated "*lest she weary me*" actually means "to strike under the eye, to give a black eye." It is the same word used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:27 for the strict control of his body. It could suggest that the persistent demands of the widow were affecting the public standing of the Judge, giving him "a black eye" in public opinion.

Paul reminds us of a truth that lies behind our dilemmas about prayer, and that is that "*We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose*" (Rom. 8:28). Garth Brooks, the country singer, has a song (*Unanswered Prayers*) that includes the line, "*Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers.*" I often thank God that He did not answer some of my prayers, which I now see to be so far off track. In the parable about the friend at midnight (Luke 11:5–13) Jesus makes the same point again. Keep praying!

Jesus ends the story with a two-fold application. In the first, there is often a misapplication that leads to a false interpretation. Some suggest that just as the widow's persistence worked against the unjust judge, so persistent prayer will ultimately receive an answer. While Jesus has certainly urged us to be persistent (v. 1), the key is the widow, whose case was right and just. God does

not answer a wrong prayer just because we persist in it. God answers prayer that is according to His will, as we are persistent (1 Thess. 5:17–18; 1 John 5:14–15). Also, we should note that God often “*bears long*” (v. 6) with us, before He answers “*speedily*” (v. 8). His answers come at just the right time, which seems to us a delay.

The second application almost seems out of place. “*Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?*” (v. 8). What a fearful and searching question this is! Some suggest, in light of its connection to the parable, that Jesus meant, “This kind of persistent, prayerful faith.” It should challenge every child of God to determine within his or her own soul, “Yes! If He comes, He will find such faith in me.”

### **The Principles**

#### **The Joy of Service, the Certainty of Accountability**

How deeply ought we to feel the burden of responsibility for what God has deposited into our care! How we ought to strive to use it well. In 1 John 2:28, he reminds us that when Jesus returns, some believers will meet Him with confidence, while others will draw back in shame. “*We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ*” (2 Cor. 5:10) where our lives will be evaluated.

Paul reminds us (1 Cor. 3:11–19) that once the foundation of Jesus Christ is laid in our lives by faith, we enter into the responsibility to build on it. The issue here is eternal reward—not salvation. The different materials represent that which is done in the flesh, versus that which is done in the Spirit by faith. The “*flood*” Jesus spoke of in the Parable of the Wise and the Foolish Builder, could very well be this judgment seat. Except here he is dealing with believers only, there will be no sinking sand. Even for the believer who builds with wood, hay, and straw, though tears will flow at the loss, in the end the foundation, at least, will stand firm (2 Tim. 2:19).

### **CLASS SIX**

#### **Conflict and Power within the Kingdom**

The kingdom of God is now present in the hearts of those who believe in Jesus and obey His word (Matt. 6:9–13). This kingdom is an invasion of the kingdom of Satan, who is the “*god of this world*” (2 Cor. 4:4). A state of war exists between these two kingdoms, resulting in perpetual confrontation and conflict. This conflict is illustrated in the following parables.

*“For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way.” 2 Thessalonians 2:7*

### **The Parables**

Jesus made it clear from the beginning of His parabolic ministry that part of the “**mystery**” of the kingdom of God in its present form would be the presence of both good and evil, and the necessity to discern one from the other. Evil always seeks to camouflage itself in the guise of good. This is most evident in many ministries and political campaigns!

### **The Cruel Vinedressers (Mark 12:1–11; Luke 20:9–19; Matt. 21:33–44)**

In this parable, we see the hostility of the devil coming through his servants. The figure of Israel as God's vineyard gone to ruin is a common picture in the Old Testament (Deut. 32:32; Psalm 80:8–16; Isa. 5:1–7; 27:1–6; Jer. 2:21; Hosea 10:1).

The grace that God had showered on Israel is seen in the words of care in Mark 12:1, "*A man planted ... set a hedge around it ... dug ... the wine vat ... built a tower.*" God had done everything short of divine force to make Israel fruitful.

Four great truths ring out from this parable. The first, already alluded to, is the gracious care of God. He gives to each of us, whatever our situation, sufficient provision for a fruitful life. The central issue of both the Judgment Seat of Christ (1 Cor. 3:11–15, for believers only) and the Great White Throne Judgment (Rev. 20:11–15, for unbelievers only) will be, "What have you done with what I gave you?"

The second is closely connected, and that is the reality of human freedom. In his book, *The Parables of Jesus*, George Buttrick has this to say about our freedom:

*"Such is our freedom. It is not an unlimited freedom (the garden has bounds), but it is within limits a real freedom. We are not free to choose our heredity, but we are free to make the best or worst of it; not free to choose our native talent, but free to double the talent or bury it; not free to select the vineyard, but free within the vineyard"* (pg. 214).

The third great truth in this story is that there is human accountability to God. All of His grace and blessings are an invitation to enter into the joy of His labor. "*We then, as workers together with Him also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain*" (2 Cor. 6:1). To be the recipients of the treasures of Heaven, "*every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ*" (Eph. 1:3), and to assume there will be no accounting for such treasures deposited to our account is to treat the cost of them (the cross) with contempt and to insult the great Giver of the gifts.

Lastly, and the greatest truth of the parable, is the infinite love of God. "*I will send my beloved son*" (Mark 12:6; Luke 20:13). This is where the parable shifts from history—the long sad tale of God's despised and rejected prophets—to prophecy, and Jesus anticipates His crucifixion as the ultimate offering of the heavenly Father on behalf of sinful men.

With the cruel rejection and murder of the beloved son, the whole past history of Israel is comprehended in this parable, with the final destruction of the vineyard, which was fulfilled in the Roman invasion and the devastation of 70 A.D.

*"The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone."*

Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17

And then, as a vindication to the thrust of the parable, was the determination of the chief priests and the scribes to arrest Him, "*For they knew He had spoken this parable against them*"

(Mark 12:12; Luke 20:19). They did not know that they had brought the final act of this tragic, historic drama on themselves!

As the final note on Jesus' prophecy, it is worth looking at Matthew 21:43, "*Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it.*" This is a prophecy of the Church and the anticipation of His "return" on the grace He has given.

*"These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full ... that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit may remain ..."* John 15:11, 16

### **The Power of the Seed and Soil, and the Mustard Seed (Mark 4:26–32; Luke 13:18–19)**

It is worth noting that this same parable in Matthew uses "*the kingdom of heaven*" (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; etc.) while both Mark and Luke use the phrase, "*kingdom of God.*" As was said earlier, Matthew was writing to the Jews, and among them, to even use the word "God" for *Yahweh*, was considered irreverent. This is an important reminder since many have made great claims about the different usages, which do not stand up to scrutiny.

In these three parables, Jesus expresses the divine optimism of the continual growth of the "kingdom of God." The seed once planted will bring forth fruit. It is not just the inherent power within the seed, it is the conducive environment of the soil. With all our vaunted scientific knowledge, Jesus says of the sower, "*he himself does not know how*" (Mark 4:27). The growth of God's kingdom is a **mystery**, which He alone understands and directs. As Paul said, "*I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase*" (1 Cor. 3:6).

The mustard seed was considered in the proverbs of Jesus' time the smallest of seeds and was used as such in the teachings of the rabbis (*The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, Volume 1*, Edersheim, pp. 592–593).

The "tree" into which it grew was about 10 feet high, but the scent of it drew the birds to nest in it. The tree as a shelter for birds was a common symbol of the prophets for an earthly kingdom (Ezek. 17:22–24; 31:3–6, 12; Dan. 4:10–12, 14, 21–22).

The indifference of the religious leaders of Israel to this humble preacher from Nazareth, and His few ragged followers, represents the smallness of the seed. The tree, which shelters the birds, is the ongoing flourishing of His kingdom, which will never end.

### **The Leaven Hidden in the Meal (Matt. 13:33–35; Luke 13:20–21)**

These parables illustrate both the power of God's Word and the ultimate victory of the kingdom of God over the devil's kingdom. While leaven in Scripture is often a picture of the pervasive influence of evil (Luke 12:1; 1 Cor. 5:7), it must be said that it is not leaven that is evil and that the point being made is of its power to permeate thoroughly into the dough. In this way, leaven, like the powers of salt and light (Matt. 5:13–16), has a quiet yet inescapable influence on its environment.



The ultimate point of the parable is the silent but persistent spread of the message of the Gospel and its final victory, *“till it was all leavened.”* This can be applied both to the individual and to the kingdom. In the soul of the believer, the seed of the Gospel will do its work until every believer is *“conformed to the image of His Son”* (Rom. 8:29). Also, in the history of the world, that which began in a small corner of the world by a scorned and rejected Savior, in the end, *“He shall rule them with a rod of iron; They shall be dashed to pieces like the potter’s vessels”* (Rev. 2:27).

### **The Principles**

*“So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.”* Isaiah 55:11

We are in the midst of a great battlefield, on which opposing spiritual forces are arrayed against each other. The forces of evil, under the direction of the devil, often seem to be winning—as they did at the crucifixion. Yet, what appeared to be their ultimate victory was soon to be seen as God’s masterstroke in the spiritual conflict of the ages!

We who live today in a world that appears to be wholly in the power of the evil one need to remember that it was in the closing hours of darkness, which enveloped the cross, that our Lord and Savior cried out in victory, *“It is finished!”* (John 19:30).

We are not on this battlefield to lose but to win a glorious victory. Our weapons are not of this earth (2 Cor. 10:3–5; Eph. 6:1–18). He who prevailed over Satan, sin, and death has already assured us of our victory (Col. 2:13–15)!

*“These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”*  
John 16:33

Since we have already won the victory through faith in Jesus Christ, let us live like victors and not like victims.

*“Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.”* 1 John 5:5

In the book of Revelation, we have a view into the future where Tribulation saints, living in the worst time of history ever—according to Jesus Himself (Matt. 24:21)—will yet live victoriously.

*“And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death.”*  
Revelation 12:11

My prayer is that those victorious saints, yet to come on the stage of history, will find the strength to stand firm in part because they will read and hear of our stories, and we will be to

them a part of the “*great cloud of witnesses*” (Heb. 12:1) who will provide examples that will cheer them on to victory.

## **CLASS SEVEN**

### **The Inauguration of the Kingdom on Earth**

One day, the Lord Jesus will return to this earth, along with the raptured Church Age saints (the Bride), to inaugurate His kingdom. This will be the wedding feast, which all faithful Jews believed they were entitled to attend. In the parables of the wedding feast, Jesus revealed that many of them would be cast out, due to their unbelief (Matt. 22:8; Luke 14:15), but that many Gentiles who believed would be welcomed.

*“Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.”* Revelation 19:7

### **The Parables**

#### **The Wedding Feast (Luke 14:15–24; Matt. 22:1–14)**

This incident takes us back to the house of another Pharisee, which we saw earlier in the parable about the seats at the table. The point it makes is, as with most parables, very simple. How tragic that by the abuse of this parable one of the most unbiblical teachings of the present time has been brought forth!

It is evident, by the differing settings given by Matthew and Luke, that this parable was spoken at different times. As was pointed out earlier, being an itinerant teacher, Jesus probably often used the same or similar stories to make His point. It was common teaching by the rabbis at the time of Jesus, and based on the Old Testament prophecies, that a great feast would inaugurate the Messianic Kingdom on Earth. Jesus, from the beginning of His ministry, portrayed this as a wedding feast (Matt. 9:15; Mark 2:19; Luke 5:34).

In Luke’s setting, Jesus was dining in the house of one of the rulers of the Pharisees (Luke 14:1). One of the guests responded to Jesus’ assurance that humble service would be repaid in the kingdom (vv. 12–14), by saying, “*Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God*” (v. 15). The impression is that he considered himself to be one who would be there. Jesus made it clear that only those who respond to the invitation, which was the Gospel offer of faith in Him as Messiah, would enjoy that privilege.

Matthew’s account makes the same point, but in a different setting, and with much stronger emphasis. I need to repeat (repetition is the key to learning) that Matthew wrote specifically to the Jewish nation. His object was two-fold: to prove that Jesus was the promised Messiah, and to indict the Jewish nation for rejecting Him.

Here, in contrast to Luke, it is not a “*great supper* [feast],” but a “marriage feast” for the son of the king. This is an obvious reference to the Lord Jesus Himself. The servants refer to the prophets, including John the Baptizer, and possibly even the apostles in the early chapters of Acts—all of whom went out to Israel inviting that “whosoever will, may come” (Rev. 22:17).

Let me point out again, the bride is not invited to the wedding feast, rather the feast is in honor of the bridegroom and the bride. John identified himself as a “*friend of the bridegroom*” (John 3:29), revealing his clear grasp of where he was in history, and of his relation to the Bridegroom.

It is also critical to point out that the word translated “*dinner*” (Matt. 22:4) is *ariston* and refers to the early meal (more of a brunch), prior to the arrival of the bride and groom. The abuse of the servants of course reflects the historical rejection of the prophets by Israel, and their refusal to humble themselves and come to God in faith. Historically, and this is pointed out by Alfred Edersheim, the Jews considered themselves to be the “*sons of the kingdom*” (Matt. 8:12) by virtue of being the seed (“*children*”) of Abraham (Matt. 3:9). What a shock for them to have both John and Jesus tell them they would be cast out of the kingdom!

Finally, as for the issue of the man “*without a wedding garment*” (vv. 12–13), this feast is not a picture of Heaven, nor of the kingdom, but of the prelude to the kingdom. Neither is this a picture of some unfaithful Christian being cast out of the kingdom “*into the outer darkness.*” Books have been written on this and they are all in error, due to poor knowledge of the culture and abuse of the text. The lack of the “*wedding garment*” shows a lack of imputed righteousness, due to unbelief.

It is not without significance that such an event did actually occur and is recorded in the Bible (John 13:23–30). Here, at the first Lord’s Table, sat Judas. He did not have imputed righteousness, because he never believed (John 6:60–71). It is also interesting that in this parable in Matthew 22, the king addresses the intruder with the word “*friend*” (Matt. 22:12), which is exactly how Jesus met Judas when he came into the garden as a guide to those sent to arrest Him (Matt. 26:50). The whole point of the story as told by both Matthew and Luke is that without faith no one will dine at the wedding feast in the kingdom.

### **The Judgment of Nations (Matt. 25:31–46)**

These last three parables also speak of judgment and reward—common themes related to the kingdom, whether on Earth or in Heaven. At the beginning of the Millennial Kingdom, the survivors of the Tribulation will stand before the Lord. Some will be believers; others will be unbelievers.

Sitting on the Mount of Olives, shortly before His arrest and crucifixion, Jesus spoke of His coming “*in ... glory, and all the holy angels with Him*” (v. 31). This is a reference to the Second Advent, in which Church Age believers will participate (Rev. 19:11–16). Those survivors of the nations, including Israel (note v. 32: “*All the nations*”) will be judged.

Ezekiel had anticipated such a judgment (Ezek. 34:17), and Jesus speaks of its fulfillment here. That the division is made, “*inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren*” (v. 40), is not a new element in Jesus’ teaching. In Mark 9:41 He had said previously, “*For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in My name, because you belong to Christ, assuredly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.*” The root motive of faith is seen here and was always the foundation of all of Jesus’ teaching. The division of Heaven and Hell is always made on either the reception or the rejection of the Gospel invitation. Faith and unbelief are the most critical questions of our present and eternal existence.

### **The Ten Virgins/Bridesmaids (Matt. 25:1–13)**

This parable is considered by some to be the most abused and twisted of all the parables. Yet, this parable follows in the train of teaching, both by precept and parable, that spoke of the times just before Jesus' Second Coming (Matt. 24). The key watchwords throughout are, "*Watch ... be ready*" (see Matt. 24:25, 33, 42, 44). The theme here is the same, as Jesus concludes with the words:

*"Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming"* (Matt. 25:13).

Once again, it cannot be overstressed that the biblical context includes not only the text itself, but also the history, culture, and language of the time. This parable occurs in the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24–25), which is all about the Tribulation and the Second Coming of Christ. The Church is never in view, and even the Bride is never mentioned, for she has not yet been introduced on the stage of history.

These ten virgins represent Israel—not the Church. The setting is outside the wedding hall, before the arrival of the Bridegroom and the Bride (the Church). The ten young virgins are representative of those who are awaiting the wedding feast.

The key phrase in the entire parable is this: "*Those who were ready went in with him to the wedding*" (v. 10). The fact that all ten of them were virgins and that all of them slept indicates that entrance is not based on personal merit or failure. It is based on "being ready," and the only focus for this is the possession of oil.

The chief distinction in "being ready" is found in vv. 3–4, "*Those who were foolish ... took no oil with them, but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps.*" Like the necessity of the wedding garment (Matt. 22:11–12), the oil represents regeneration by faith, and here, the presence of the Spirit of God.

Neil R. Lightfoot, in his book, *Lessons from the Parables* (pp. 167–169), makes three great points on the meaning of this parable:

1. We cannot neglect preparation and be ready at His coming.
2. We cannot borrow what must be bought (Isa. 55:1–3, 6).
3. We cannot recall lost opportunities.

### **The Highly Honored Servant (Luke 12:35–40)**

In keeping with the admonition to "*Watch ... be ready,*" this parable gives us the blessing of those who are vigilant. In another short parable of a similar nature (Luke 17:6–10), Jesus spoke of the master who had his servant, just back from the plowing, served him his supper first, and then took his own. Here, He changes that picture.

Here, He begins with the challenge, "*Let your waist be girded and your lamps burning*" (v. 35), when the master returns. Those who are about the master's business are given a priceless promise ...

*“Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching. Assuredly, I say to you that he will gird himself and have them sit down to eat, and will come and serve them.” (v. 37)*

While this is speaking to those who are watching at the Second Coming of Christ, I would assume that it would also apply, in principle, to those members of the Body of Christ who are watching for the Rapture of the Church (1 Thess. 4:13–17). In fact, Paul implies this very thing in his farewell song to Timothy.

*“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only **but also to all who have loved His appearing.**” 2 Timothy 4:7–8*

### **The Principles**

How each of us ought to consider what God has deposited in us! How we ought to be vigilant every day, for every opportunity. Let us learn to live in joyful expectation of the return of our Savior. And as we watch, let us also work, in whatever area of the harvest field we are in, knowing that only eternity can make sense of time and that Heaven has healing for all earthly sorrows.

There is no better passage for us to end with than Revelation 2:8–11 ...

*“These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: “I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.””*

*“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.” 2 Corinthians 5:10*

*“Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong. Let all that you do be done with love.” 1 Corinthians 16:13–14*

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