

***PARABLES OF JESUS,
PARABLES OF GRACE***

INTRODUCTORY BIBLE STUDIES

LARRY PERKINS, PH.D.

***PROFESSOR OF BIBLICAL STUDIES,
NORTHWEST BAPTIST SEMINARY***

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PREFACE

Through his parables Jesus shared many essential elements of his messianic message. Over the centuries many people have struggled to understand precisely what Jesus meant and many different interpretations have emerged. When today we come to these fascinating little stories embedded in the Gospels, our challenge is threefold:

- a. appreciate the contributions by many Christian pastors and scholars over 2,000 years of church history to the study of Jesus' parables;
- b. appreciate the literary context in which the Gospel writers set these teachings of Jesus and how these narratives inform our understanding of Jesus' parables;
- c. understand the ways in which Jesus used social, agricultural, and commercial practices common in first century Palestine and insure that our interpretation takes these factors seriously into consideration.

This short series of Bible Studies introduces you to selected parables of Jesus that the writers of the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke embedded in their narratives. As you interact with the biblical account, each study encourages you:

- to consider carefully the surrounding narrative context of the parable and how this context helps you to understand Jesus' message in that parable;
- to consider the larger scope of Jesus' message and how the particular content of a specific parable contributes to and fits into our understanding of Jesus' teaching, particularly as this relates to his Kingdom teaching;
- to discern how the message of the parables should shape our spiritual activities as Christians today.

It is assumed, of course, that the reader will be constantly using the biblical text as the primary materials for study and reflection.

The author acknowledges his indebtedness to many sources in the preparation of these materials.

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Introduction – The Nature of Parables in Jesus' Teaching

Throughout human history stories demonstrate great power to communicate ideas and to move people to action. Listen to any skilled orator and you will soon discover how integral to the presentation illustrations, metaphors, proverbs, extended comparisons are to his or her success as a speaker. Such anecdotes or word-pictures serve to focus attention or to let in more light, like windows in a room, so that the listener can resonate with the message more effectively.

We discover many examples of these stories in the Old Testament. Of course, the many proverbs created by Solomon stand in a class by themselves. Observations from nature, human life, weather, athletics, crafts of various kinds, are all bent to serve the needs of the wise teacher. Other parts of the Old Testament provide excellent examples as well:

- Jotham's parable of the various trees which were asked to serve as king addresses the terrible injustice which Abimelech his brother had shown by murdering 69 of his brothers in order to secure his position as king. Only Jotham had escaped. (Judges 9:7-20)
- Nathan's rebuke of David for the murder of Uriah comes in the form of the parable about the poor man's sheep. (2 Samuel 12:1-12)
- Isaiah sings about the vineyard, as a means by which to tell Israel of God's intense displeasure with her. (Isaiah 5:1-7)
- Ezekiel's allegory about an unfaithful wife compares Israel's rejection of her covenant responsibilities before God. (Ezekiel 16)
- Nebuchadnezzar's dream about the great tree cut down shows him his imminent future (Daniel 4:4-27)

Most often we discover such comparisons were used to bring Israel to repentance. They are part of God's prophetic warnings of judgment and condemnation. Sometimes they are shocking in their language or mysterious in their meaning. Regardless, they are designed to provoke the listener to reflect upon their circumstances and, hopefully, be persuaded to change. They become a significant part of the prophet's toolkit as he carries out his unpopular role among God's people.

The definition of a 'parable' is tricky. The word itself in the New Testament suggests something laid side-by-side for the sake of comparison. The Old Testament term (*masha*) includes a wide variety of literary forms (one sentence proverbs, extended stories, allegories, similes, metaphors, etc.) and the New Testament term seems to have as wide a scope. In Mark's Gospel, for example, the word 'parable' occurs twelve times.¹ He describes with this term the one sentence comparisons about the divided kingdom and divided house in 3:23-24 and the brief

¹ 3:23; 4:2,10,11,13,33,34; 7:17; 12:1,12; 13:28. Most of the occurrences are in chapter 4.

story about the strong man being robbed (3:27). But Mark also uses the term to describe the extended story about the farmer planting seed in 4:2-9 and the wicked tenant farmers told in 12:1-12. Some are interpreted as allegories (the wheat and weeds in Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43) whereas others are left without any specific explanation (the seed growing secretly, Mark 4:26-29) and we struggle to know exactly what Jesus intended to teach through it. However, despite the wide variety of materials classified in the Gospels as parables, there is this consistent element of comparison. Depending upon how you define this term, there are as many as 70 parables found in the Gospels.

A peculiarity which is hard to understand is that John's Gospel does not contain parables similar to those found in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Jesus uses imagery such as the vine and branches, the seed which falls into the ground and dies, the sheep and shepherd. However, these are not stories such as we discover him using in the other gospels. And when we turn to the remainder of the New Testament, very few examples occur. Perhaps Paul's analogy of the wild and cultivated olive branches in Romans 11 would be one.

Another feature about parables, as found in Jesus' teaching, is that they are always true to nature or the way in which people act or things work. In other words they are not fables, stories grotesque or contrary to what we know is true. When you review all of the stories Jesus told, it is hard to find one example which would contradict this principle. Perhaps the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31 might be an exception. However, since we do not know firsthand the realities of Gehenna, we are hard pressed to consider this a 'fable'. Jesus uses examples from real life as comparisons for his theological and moral principles.

Why are the parables important to understand and study? Their sheer volume indicates that much of Jesus' most important teaching emerges through this medium. If we want to know what Jesus thought about God, the Kingdom, human nature, the world, etc., then we must explore his parables. He has chosen to express himself to us in this way. In some way through these stories Jesus' teachings hit with dramatic power. They work with subtlety. As we listen to the storyline, we hear a neat, compact anecdote. But then Jesus challenges us to push beneath the surface of the simple story and ask what it means spiritually.

Parables always function on two levels – the level of the storyline and the spiritual. The disciples frequently had difficulty discerning Jesus' spiritual lesson and had to ask him about this. Patiently Jesus explains. If people like Peter and James and John struggled to understand them, we should be careful not to presume too quickly that we have grasped all of their intended meaning.

Interpreting the parables requires us to pay particular attention to the context in which the Gospel writers place them. Without this setting we are left to guess at their meaning because we have no other way to discern their application. Their structure can also help in this process. Most parables are built around the interaction of two (strong man and thief) or, at the most,

three characters (man and his two sons). Some have observed that where we have two characters, we should presume there is one primary message Jesus seeks to communicate and where we have three characters, there may be two key ideas. This principle has certain validity, but is not an infallible guide.

And then there is the issue of allegorical interpretation². Certainly Jesus intended some parables as allegories. His own interpretation attaches significance to many details within the story (Matthew 13 – wheat and weeds). However, we should not suppose that every parable is an allegory. Where Jesus so indicates, it is appropriate to interpret it in this way. Where he does not, we should probably consider the story to be illustrating one general idea, with the various details adding colour, but not intended to have individual significance.

Occasionally, Jesus will tell a parable which deliberately has linkages with one found in the OT. For example, the story of the wicked tenant farmers told in Mark 12:1-12 surely reflects Isaiah's song of the vineyard found in Isaiah 5:1-7. When Jesus proclaims this parable in the temple at Jerusalem before the religious leaders, they would quickly identify the linkages with Isaiah's song. The parable gains greater power through this deliberate retelling. Sometimes Jesus will use an OT motif as the basis for his comparison and expect his listeners to identify this connection (i.e. the bridegroom comparison told in Mark 2:19-22).

Language is both informative as well as performative. In other words it communicates knowledge as well as stirs people to action. Commands, for example, are designed to create certain activity. Moral instruction seeks to change people's behaviours. What kind of language do we have in the parables of Jesus? Is he merely communicating ideas – heavenly ideas in earthly dress? Or is Jesus intending to provoke people to action? Are the parables informing or stimulating people to perform? The stress in Jesus ministry is upon *hearing and doing*. His parables serve a critical function as they require people to respond and change. People cannot remain the same after they have heard Jesus' parables. Ignoring them deepens our condemnation; responding to them pushes us to greater holiness and commitment to God. They require a decision.

Hundreds of people have written books seeking to express the meaning of Jesus' parables. These stories continue to intrigue and challenge us, both because Jesus is the one who told them and because their drama and vitality attract us. As we seek to understand them more completely, I would encourage you to do the following:

- d. read them yourself and let the words of Jesus confront you afresh;
- e. find a book which talks about them and expand your own understanding;

² An allegory is "the extension over a whole story of...the metaphor. It is nothing more and nothing less than an extended metaphor in narratory form. An allegory, then, is quite simply a story in which there are two levels of meaning, the literal and the metaphorical." (Madelaine Boucher. *The Mysterious Parable. A Literary Study* (Washington, D.C.; Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1977), page 20.)

- f. pray that God will speak to you through them in ways He has never done before – for comfort, encouragement, and holy change.

"Whether we 'get' them or not, they remain first and foremost his way of getting to us."

"The parable is the form of the language of Jesus which corresponds to the incarnation."

"At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought. "

Questions to Stimulate Discussion

1. Consider some of the ways that parables continue to influence our lives today (e.g. ethnic stories, children's tales, business cases, political symbols, etc.) Why are they so powerful in their influence?
2. Why are parables such an important part of the prophet's message in the Old Testament? What advantage do they give to the prophet in presenting his message?
3. How should we define a parable according to the way Jesus uses them in the Gospel narratives? Why do you think John chooses not to include examples of Jesus' parables in his Gospel?
4. What is it about parables that seems to make their interpretation so challenging?
5. If parables always incorporate some kind of comparison, how do we know what two things Jesus is comparing in each case? How does 'allegory' figure into the interpretation of parables?
6. What do we need to know about the first-century Palestine context in order to understand Jesus' parables correctly? What do we need to know about Jesus' teaching to understand his parables correctly?
7. How do you think Jesus intended people to respond to his parables? Why?
8. What is it that you appreciate most about Jesus' parables? Why?

Personal Study Options

Read the "Parables of the Two Sons" (Luke 15:11-32). Try to define how the context of Jesus' teaching in Luke 15 help us to understand the primary point of this parable. How do the two sons and their relationship to their father define various responses by Jesus' contemporaries to himself and his message? Where do you fit into these categories?

The Purpose of Parables in Jesus' Teaching

(Mark 4:10-12, 21-25)

We easily admit that parables form a significant part of Jesus' teaching, but when it comes to explaining why this is so, the answer does not arise so simply. His decision to share much of his teaching through this medium must be deliberate, because Jesus had a specific mission and he knew best how to communicate with people. It is not enough to recognize Jesus' continual use of parables, nor to develop the ability to interpret an individual parable; we must also push further to discover the reasons why Jesus used them so frequently. The Old Testament yields a certain number of parables, but no prior prophet or wise man matches Jesus' output.

As we discerned in our last study, both the prophetic and wisdom traditions in the Old Testament contained examples of parables. Here we find one clue to Jesus' use. He is himself both prophet and wise man. It is not surprising then to find him employing parables as an effective teaching and proclamation tool. The sheer quantity of them, however, does amaze us, particularly if Jesus employs such stories, as the OT prophets primarily do, to proclaim messages of God's judgment to Israel. But let's not make this assumption before we have studied these parables in greater detail. At this point we can say that parables are a prophet's tool and Jesus certainly fills a prophet's calling.

The most important passage in the New Testament which explains why Jesus used parables comes in Mark 4:10-12, 21-25 (and parallel passages in Matthew 13 and Luke 8). Mark's fourth chapter is filled with examples of Jesus' parables spoken primarily to the crowds of Galilee (4:1). The discussion about his purpose in using them arises because of the opposition he has experienced from the religious leaders in Jerusalem and his own family (3:20-35). His first parables are told in the context of such controversy (2:18-22; 3:23-27). The parable of the soils in 4:2-9 explicitly addresses this issue and explains why people are responding to him in such diverse ways – with outright faith, with curiosity, with outrage. When his own followers ask him what this parable means, Jesus offers his explanation for their use in his kingdom ministry.

The first thing Jesus emphasizes is that his parables concern aspects of the 'mystery of the kingdom of God' (vs. 11). Many of the parables have as an introduction "the kingdom of God is like...." If we want to understand all the details about the Kingdom of God, we have to study Jesus' parables. But there is a special twist to this. Jesus says that his disciples receive from God the mystery of the Kingdom directly. For those on the 'outside', those who have not yet expressed faith or who oppose Jesus, the various aspects of the Kingdom are encased in parables. In other words, the parables of Jesus act as a sorting mechanism, a filter. For those who oppose Jesus or resist his message, the parables present an interesting story, but no more. All they perceive is the first level of meaning, the story line. But for those who are seeking, who in repentance exercise faith and follow Jesus, the second level of meaning becomes their goal

and they are not content until Jesus has revealed to them this spiritual aspect of his story's meaning. Parables, then, function in Jesus' ministry both to reveal the Kingdom and also to conceal the Kingdom, at one and the same time.

Secondly, Jesus' parables function as a prophetic means of judgment against those who refuse to repent and in this way Jesus fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah 6:9-10. In other words, Jesus' manner of operation with parables is no different from that of the OT prophets who followed God's express commands. God gave to Isaiah a serious message for Israel, but at the same time warned him that Israel in the majority of cases would not listen to his message and repent. Although the opportunity was being presented through Isaiah for their restoration, Israel would not accept this benefit. So they heard and saw, but remained spiritually blind.

"Parables, it seems, may proclaim a truth as a herald does, and at the same time conceal truth like an oracle."

The critical ingredient is how one hears. For a person who already perceives the reality of God at work in Jesus, the parables point to deeper, spiritual truths about the Kingdom. But if a person has not discerned God at work in Jesus, then the parables tend to obscure matters even more. And so the critical matter is 'responsible hearing'.

Thirdly, we must recognize that the motivation of God is not to prevent people from coming to salvation. Rather, it is His desire that all should respond. The reality is, however, that some people's motivations prevent them from obeying. They do not want to see or hear, because they are afraid that this will lead them to repent – something they do not wish to do.³ So Jesus is not preventing people from responding to his message of hope by using parables. No, they function as discriminating device, a sorting device, which brings into public display the real, spiritual condition of people, particularly a refusal to repent.

Fourthly, the ultimate goal is revelation. Consider vs. 21-22. Jesus declares that "whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open." I would suggest that this saying also relates back to the issue of parables and Jesus' teaching. He and his mission are like the lamp which is intended to be placed on the lampstand, not hidden under a basket or bed. Illumination is the purpose of such an implement! Just so with Jesus. His coming will result in great revelation. The mystery will be removed. Exactly at what point this occurs is not stated. However, if we consider other portions of scripture, the time of revelation seems to be the resurrection and Pentecost. As Paul says, the mystery of Christ has now been revealed. We know what it is all about. We also realize that our knowledge of the Kingdom is still partial, but at the return of Christ, we will know it all. So the

³ The translation of verse 12 is very controversial. However, I would suggest that the final part of the verse should read "lest they turn and be forgiven", comprising a clause of fear or caution. In other words their refusal to see or hear arises from a fear that they might respond and repent, something they have no intention of doing.

parables are a step in the progress of revelation. Partial and incomplete at this point, God's intention certainly is full disclosure when it suits His purposes (as with Old Testament oracles).

Finally, Jesus warns his listeners about a critical spiritual principle (vs. 24-25). The initial command "consider carefully what you hear" sets the context for our understanding of these verses – responsible hearing. Jesus promises that the more we seek to understand God's ways, the more he will reveal. However, should we indicate no interest in these matters, then gradually our desire to even consider the things of God evaporates – it is taken away just as satan steals the word of truth from a person's heart. As we study God's word, meditate upon its meaning, and converse with one another about its application, God's Spirit enables us to penetrate more and more into its full sense. We comprehend more today than we did yesterday or the year before by God's grace. Conversely, the more we distance ourselves from God, and the less attention we pay to Him and His purposes, as Paul says in Romans, God gives us up to our depraved minds and the consequences of such enslavement.

Jesus had a very specific purpose in using parables. It cuts to the very heart of his mission as Messiah and the establishment of a new people of God. He comes teaching and proclaiming, with the full intention to make his message available to all. Along with his teaching come his amazing miracles that cause all who see them to marvel. But still we know that many who witnessed these miracles did not express faith in Jesus Christ. They saw, they heard, but did not comprehend. Why? Because they were unwilling. Like Jesus' townspeople in Nazareth they could not explain the source of Jesus' teaching or the power he exercised, but they became offended at him, instead of acknowledging him as Lord and Saviour. Perhaps we see this principle expressed in even larger scope in Jesus' warnings about Jerusalem's destruction in chapter 13 of Mark. Even what these people knew of God and experienced from His hand was going to be destroyed because they refused to see and hear God's message through His beloved son. The outcome would be that God would "come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others" (Mark 12:9).

The principles underlying Jesus' use of parables still operate today. For each of us the key question remains – are we seeking to hear what God is saying or are we deliberately ignoring His message? For those truly seeking by faith to understand Jesus and His Gospel, God promises more and more comprehension of spiritual truth. We will know the secret of the Kingdom of God. Conversely, if we continually despise such things and refuse to consider them, God eventually abandons us to our faithless condition and all its horrendous consequences. Jesus' parables do express grace, the opportunity to respond to and love God as He deserves and desires.

Questions to Stimulate Discussion

1. Who were the Old Testament figures who tended to use parables? What does this suggest about the way Jesus wanted his ministry to be understood by the people?
2. What is the general context of Jesus' parable discourse in Mark 4? What precedes in chapter 3:13-35? What do these events suggest about Jesus' intent in giving these parables?
3. What do you think the "mystery of the Kingdom of God" refers to (Mark 4:11)? Why do the followers of Jesus have access to this mystery? What does the language of 'outside/inside' suggest about the function of parables?
4. How does Isaiah 6:9-10 help us understand Jesus' use of parables (Mark 4:11-12)? What does this have to do with proper 'hearing'?
5. Why is it that some people respond and seek for more truth from Jesus and others reject him as mad or demon-possessed?
6. What does the parable of the lampstand tell us about the ultimate goal of Jesus' teaching and mission (4:21-23)?
7. What is the critical principle that Jesus shares in Mark 4:24-25? Is this principle still operating today? How? What does it mean for our activity as Christians?
8. How are you listening to God today? Is this a daily quest? Share a recent experience in which you believe God was speaking to you and express how this communication occurred.

Personal Study Options

Spend some time studying Jesus' concept of the Kingdom of God. Try to prepare a good definition of the Kingdom of God. Compare your definition to the key ideas expressed in Jesus' parables of the Kingdom. What relevance does the mystery of the Kingdom of God have for you and your church today?

The Sower and the Soils – The Key to All Parables

(Mark 4:1-20; Matthew 13:1-23; Luke 8:4-15)

Among the parables which Jesus taught some have achieved almost instant recognition within and without the church (i.e. the Prodigal Son, the Mustard Seed, etc.). Perhaps the parable of the Four Soils or the Sower and the Soils or the Sower and the Seed, whichever title is most appropriate, also belongs in this category. In all three Synoptic Gospels this parable comes first in the chapter which introduces much of Jesus' parabolic teaching (Mark 4, Matthew 13, Luke 8) and so by virtue of its position, it has attracted tremendous attention and rightly so. It expresses the key characteristics that have come to define Jesus' stories – use of a common, human activity; concise expression; memorable story patterns; ambiguity as to its intent.

Despite its significant profile, when it comes to determining the meaning of this parable, we discover many different suggestions. Some consider it to be a picture of Christian discipleship, i.e. various patterns of sanctification. Others apply it primarily to the process of evangelism and the diverse responses to the Gospel message. And still others would suggest it is a picture of Israel's historical interaction with God's prophetic messages. We can multiply the proposed interpretations, but the point soon emerges that Jesus' intent in expressing this parable is not immediately clear. If we struggle to understand it, even with the application Jesus gave, then we can sympathize with Jesus' disciples who came to him and asked him 'about the parables' (Mark 4:10) because they were quite uncertain as to the meaning of these stories and in particular the parable of the four soils.

Jesus provides some clues as to its intended meaning. For example, at the end of the parable Jesus warns that the person "who has ears to hear, let him hear," (Mark 4:9) a refrain which is repeated variously throughout the chapter (vs.23, 24). In some way this parable then speaks to the issue of people listening to and understanding something. In vs. 11 Jesus explains that to his disciples God has "given the mystery (secret) of the Kingdom of God." Somehow this parable relates to God's eternal purpose and rule in this world and beyond. Jesus intends his followers to make the connection between the content of the parable and some aspect of God's Kingdom. The parables of the Seed Growing Secretly and the Mustard Seed that follow in Mark 4 similarly relate directly to Kingdom issues. Discerning the meaning of this parable is critical for Jesus' disciples because this parable in some sense holds the key to all other parables (Mark 4:13). Their desire to know is a good sign of their vigorous faith, but their inability to understand expresses how immature that faith really is.

To understand this parable we need to identify as carefully as possible three things: who is the sower; what does the seed represent; and whom do the various soils represent? We can seek for answers to these questions not only in what Jesus himself says as recorded in Mark, but

also in Mark's own editorial comments as he tries to help his readers comprehend "the good news of Jesus, Messiah, son of God."

What does the function of sowing seed describe? Given that Jesus tells us the 'seed' is 'the word' (vs. 14), sowing seed presumably represents proclamation or teaching, i.e. some kind of communication activity. We should note that this parable finds expression in the midst of Jesus' teaching ministry (cf. Mark 4:1). Similarly this section concludes in vs.33-34 with Mark telling us that "Jesus spoke the word."

We also must link the emphasis upon "hearing and listening" with activity of planting seed. Jesus' allusion to the words of Isaiah 6:9-10 (cf. Mark 4:11-12) would suggest as well that the teaching he is describing is a prophetic teaching or proclamation. In other words the nature of the message gains authority and significance because it is prophetic.

Given then these various clues and linkages, I would suggest that the seed sowing described in this parable represents a prophetic proclamation or teaching that God is revealing. The urgency to listen and respond arises from this prophetic context.

Who is the sower? We can probably answer this question at various levels. In Mark's perspective Jesus is the sower because, as he says in vs.33 "with many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them." Similarly, if Jesus uses the metaphor of the lamp in vs. 21 to refer to himself, then again the focus would be upon him as the sower of the seed, the proclaimer of the prophetic message.

It is also possible to see God ultimately as the sower in that He has sent Jesus or other prophets to reveal His word. And then, by extension, those whom Jesus appoints as his delegates become in their own right 'seed sowers', whether we regard this as an evangelistic or teaching function. In the light of Mark 1:14-15 where Jesus' initial proclamation sets the tone for the entire Gospel story I think that we must regard Jesus as the sower of the seed.

If Jesus is the sower, what does he sow? What message does he bring? In his explanation of the parable Jesus consistently links seed with "the word" (4:14,15,16,17,18,19,20). Several times in Mark's Gospel special emphasis is placed upon Jesus' words. For example, in 2:2 Jesus "was speaking the word to them [i.e. the crowd]"; in 8:38 Jesus warns people not "to be ashamed of me and my words"; in 13:31 Jesus prophesies that "my words shall never pass away." Jesus' words identify the content of his proclamation given in 1:15 – "The time stands fulfilled; the Kingdom of God stands near. Repent and exercise faith in the Good News" (my translation). The word is 'the good news' about the presence of the rule and power of God in Jesus Christ for the purpose of bringing salvation to humanity. It includes the truth about the significance of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God, as well as the call to all people to respond in repentance and confidence to Jesus' proclamation by becoming his disciples. In proclaiming this word Jesus is the culmination of God's many, previous revelations to Israel, His covenant people,

and promises about such a saviour and such a salvation. Will their dismal history in response to God's revelations be repeated in their response to Jesus' new vision for God's people?

This leads us naturally to consider whom the soils represent. In this case Jesus is quite explicit in his interpretation of the parable (Mark 4:13-20). He indicates that four categories of people are represented by four different kinds of soil:

hard-packed soil of the pathnon-receptive; no fruit

rocky substrate soilreceptive, but plants shrivel for lack of root; no fruit

weed-choked soilreceptive, but growth impeded, no maturity; no fruit

good soilreceptive, achieve maturity; fruit produced.

In every case the word is heard, but the degree of receptiveness to the word and the reasons for this divergence are quite different. In the first instance the people included in these categories would be Jesus' contemporaries, the Jewish and Gentile people in the various regions in and around Palestine. However, the timelessness of the parable enables us also to consider its application as well to the past generations of Israelites and their pattern of response to God's prophetic word, as well as to the future generations of humanity who will hear the gospel message and respond variously to it. In the context of Mark's Gospel, however, we should probably consider this parable a key to understanding why people respond to Jesus in such varied ways – from seeking to execute him, all the way to being willing to die for him. As far as Jesus is concerned the explanation for this tremendous diversity lies entirely in how people hear his message and understand his mission. This is the key issue. Thus if we do not understand this parable, how will we understand the role and significance of Jesus himself?

Finally, we must consider the reasons Jesus gives for these different human responses to his proclamation. We discover:

- satanic interference directly in some cases
- pressure and persecution discourage others
- worries of life, deceitfulness of wealth, desires for other things blunt faith.

I am sure Jesus uses these as broadly representative categories and we could expand them to include other things. It is interesting to note that Jesus only attributes one category of human rejection directly to satanic interference. For the other two categories evil expressed directly through human agency is the primary reason – external in one case (persecution) and internal in the other case (anxiety, desire for wealth, etc.). This analysis presents to us a very clear picture of our current situation as we evaluate people's responses to the Gospel message.

This parable, then, summarizes neatly the entire mission of Jesus. He comes with the word of God, proclaiming a prophetic message and inviting the response of people, Jews and Gentiles, and encouraging their participation in God's rule. After his inaugural experience in presenting his message, he has seen the diversity of response – conspiracy to kill him, accusation from his family that he is mad, accusation that he is demon-possessed, full and complete

willingness to follow him no matter what the cost, etc. (all of this carefully described by Mark in chapters 1-3). Now as he prepares his disciples to carry on his mission, he wants them to understand as well the degree of opposition they will experience. But he also wants them to have confidence that God's purposes will result in tremendous harvest, a harvest of unusual richness and proportion. God's Kingdom work will succeed no matter the response of humanity.

Questions to Stimulate Discussion

1. What agricultural practices used in first century Galilee do we need to know about in order to understand the key ideas presented in the parable of the Sower and the Soils? What insights do they provide?
2. What have been some of the ways people in the history of the church have understood this parable? How have you normally understood its meaning? Why?
3. What clues does Jesus provide to point us to his intended meaning? Consider Mark 4:9, 23-24. What about vs. 10-12?
4. Why do you think Jesus said that understanding this parable is critical to understanding all parables (4:13)?
5. Who is the Sower? What does the seed represent? Whom do the various soils characterize?
6. Jesus, in response to his followers' request provides an explanation in vs. 13-20. In the light of this explanation, what does this parable mean for people in first century Palestine? For us today?
7. Why do some people respond but not 'produce fruit'? What does this mean?
8. Do the various reasons that Jesus provides for people's rejection of his message still apply today? Why?
9. In a sense this parable is a short version of the complete mission of Jesus. What does the tremendous harvest suggest will be the result of Jesus mission?

Personal Study Options

The concept of 'bearing fruit' is used frequently in the New Testament. Consider John 15, Galatians 5-6, and James 3:18. When Jesus uses this concept in the parable of the Sower and the Soils, what is his primary application of this word-picture? If we consider it in the light of Israelite history, what would 'fruit-bearing' mean? If we consider it in the context of 'hearing Jesus' message', what would 'fruit-bearing' mean? If we consider it in relation to understanding the 'mystery of the Kingdom', what would 'fruit-bearing' mean? What finally then do you conclude Jesus wanted us to understand from this metaphor? How does this apply to your personal situation?

More Parables About Seeds

(Mark 4:26-32)

Most of Jesus' parables express ideas about the nature of the Kingdom of God (or Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew's Gospel). Jesus told his disciples that the "secret of the Kingdom" had been given to them and, in addition to Jesus' miracles and actions, this 'secret' comes to light in his parables, especially to those who exercise faith. Sometimes he provides an explanation with his parables so that his followers can discern precisely what he is teaching about the Kingdom, but on other occasions no interpretation is in the record. Two short parables of the Kingdom – the Seed Growing Secretly and the Mustard Seed – fall into this category. As a result people have debated the message that Jesus wanted his audience to learn from these short comparison stories.

In the absence of any explicit interpretation, what guidelines can we discover to help us understand Jesus' intent? *First*, both of these parables begin with the statement that Jesus is seeking some comparison by which to explain the nature of the Kingdom of God. So, we must ask what aspect of the Kingdom is Jesus emphasizing in these parables? Is it the same in both or do we have a different aspect expressed in each? *Secondly*, these parables are very short, only two or three verses each, so that the message will not be complex. Rather, we should probably anticipate that one key idea would be stressed in each. The extended metaphor of the parable of the soils and its allegorical application may not be the way in which we should understand these much shorter, simpler comparison stories. *Thirdly*, we should ask what the key focus of Jesus' teaching has been in the immediate context. The parable of the soils described the various ways in which people were hearing and responding to Jesus' message about the Kingdom. Not everyone who heard his message or observed his miracles agreed that the Kingdom of God was revealing itself in and through him. Jesus explains that in some way the Kingdom is hidden (Mark 4:21-23), but is in process of being disclosed. So one of the issues Jesus must address is the Kingdom's somewhat undistinguished beginning and how to see this as part of God's purpose.

The Mustard Seed (Mark 4:30-32; Matthew 13:31-32; Luke 13:18-19)

Each of the Synoptic Gospels records this parable. Mark and Matthew set it in the context of an extended discourse that includes other parables dealing with the issue of people's response to Jesus. Luke, however, sets it in the context of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, following the healing of a crippled woman on the Sabbath and the controversy that this arouses among the Jewish religious leaders. This different placement raises an interesting question. Did Jesus only tell his parables once or did he repeat them on different occasions, dealing with different groups and different issues? Given the nature of his itinerant ministry and the need to keep repeating his message, repetition would seem appropriate. In addition, one of the roles his disciples had was to

learn and remember his message and the usage of such stories in multiple contexts would certainly assist the memory process.

Three elements seem to stand out in the various accounts:

1. the smallness of the mustard seed;
2. the greatness of the plant which matures from the seed;
3. the provision of shelter for birds in the branches of the mature plant.

With respect to the first two elements, there is obvious interest in the contrast between the small beginning and the impressive ending or result. In Mark's Gospel this contrast is underlined by the terms "smaller than all seeds upon the earth"(vs.31) and "greater than all plants" (vs.32). Of course, Jesus here is not being scientific in exactness, but rather relates to the experience of the people in Galilee. The third element, i.e. the nesting of birds in its branches, emphasizes the magnitude and usefulness of the final stage of growth.

If the contrast between small beginning and impressive conclusion is the point of comparison Jesus desires to make with the Kingdom of God, how does this fit his message? The followers of Jesus have no difficulty believing in and anticipating the glorious ending of the Kingdom of God, after all this was their primary hope. God would intervene and bring His glory into the context of His people for their salvation and the judgment of the evil realm. But when people, including his disciples, observe Jesus' method for introducing the Kingdom of God with its rather humble, vulnerable, and hidden presence, focused upon a suffering and dying Messiah, they have trouble connecting his work with their Kingdom expectations. Jesus' origins in Nazareth seem inconsistent with a Messiah. His categorical statements that the Messiah must suffer and die did not fit their schemes. Jesus' refusal to follow an expected military strategy to usher in the Kingdom was incongruous in their minds with God's prophetic word preserved in the Old Testament. So Jesus has to teach his followers that this small, humble beginning truly was God's way of inaugurating His Kingdom work, which would result in a mighty, powerful conclusion.

The "nesting birds in the branches" may be an allusion to Old Testament passages where prophets express God's work for His people as a comparison with a mighty tree which provides shelter for various creatures (cf. Ezekiel 17:23 and Daniel 4:12,21). If so, it is a very general allusion. Jesus perhaps wants to emphasize that the Kingdom in its maturity will bring extensive blessing.

The Seed Growing Secretly (Mark 4:26-29)

This parable is unique to Mark's Gospel and generates many more questions about its meaning. The key problem is to assess correctly the primary point of comparison. Is it the certainty of the harvest? Or is it the mysterious, but consistent process of growth? Is the farmer supposed to represent someone? If so, whom? I would suggest that trying to identify the farmer with a specific figure leads us down the wrong track. Rather, as with the parable of the mustard

seed, we need to identify as clearly as possible the main idea about the Kingdom of God that Jesus is seeking to explain by this comparison.

Three elements again seem to surface:

1. the inability of the farmer to explain or affect the germination of the seed or the process of growth once the seed is planted;
2. the certainty of the seed's growth to maturity – it happens "all by itself";
3. the certainty of the harvest and its reaping.

If these are the primary elements in this parable, then I would suggest that Jesus' message relates to the growth of the Kingdom. We may not understand how this growth is occurring, but we can observe it and nurture it as best we can. As in the growth process, so in the Kingdom's development, there is a certain order that must be followed before maturity and harvest comes. What is certain, however, is the ultimate success of the Kingdom, i.e. the harvest comes and it is secured.

As we seek to interpret the parables in Mark 4, we note how they generally can be used mutually to understand each other. However, it is a mistake to think that the symbolic meaning of an element in one parable (i.e. seed in the parable of the soils and the seed in the parable of the mustard seed or the seed growing secretly) will remain the same. In one case, for example, the seed represents the prophetic message of Jesus, but in another case it represents the Kingdom. Sometimes the various characters or things in a parable will have a definite meaning. However, on other occasions, the story as a whole communicates the point of comparison.

As Jesus tells these two parables, he seems to stress the certain victory of the Kingdom of God despite its apparent weak, insignificant, and unusual beginnings. Such wisdom is necessary for his disciples to grasp so that they will not be discouraged or misled because they misunderstand what he is doing and why. Such development, Jesus teaches, is part of the nature of the Kingdom of God. Jesus' own role as Messiah, in which suffering and death precede resurrection and glory, follows the same pattern. Such a vision of God's purposes represents quite a new departure in Israel. Jewish people had their expectations fixed on the glory aspect and so the paradigm of Kingdom and Messiah Jesus proclaims does not fit. This leads some to reject him and disregard the evidence for the Kingdom's presence expressed through his miracles, exorcisms, and prophetic teachings. Jesus' interpretation of the Old Testament record also comes into play here because it represents a whole new way of understanding God's intentions. It is this element of a suffering Messiah and a Kingdom based upon love, joy and peace in the Holy Spirit which Paul has to come to terms with and which he considers part of the mystery of the Gospel (cf. Ephesians 3).

These parables present both promise and warning. On the one hand, Jesus affirms God's purposes in him ("You are my beloved son, in you I have great pleasure" (Mark 1:11)) and encourages his followers to anticipate the glory that will come. And even in the suffering that

they experience for the sake of the Kingdom, there is blessing. God's Kingdom work will be successful and accomplish what He intends despite the efforts of satan and people to thwart it. On the other hand, there is strong warning. If people refuse to see in Jesus the presence and beginning of God's Kingdom work and so reject him and his message, they will miss out on the harvest and the blessings that the Kingdom offers.

Questions to Stimulate Discussion

1. Sometimes Jesus provides an interpretation for his parables and at other times he does not. Why do you think this is the case?
2. When we lack a specific interpretation from Jesus, what principles can we use to develop an appropriate, accurate interpretation?
3. Different Gospels place the parables of the Mustard Seed in various contexts. Why does this happen?
4. What are three key elements in the Mustard Seed story that might guide our interpretation?
5. In what ways does the contrast between initial smallness and eventual greatness help us understand the nature of the Kingdom?
6. Which parable is unique to Mark's Gospel?
7. What three elements seem to be key elements of this parable?
8. In all three specific parables in Mark 4 the idea of a seed plays a prominent role. Does the symbolic meaning of the seed remain the same in each parable or does it change? Why?
9. In what way do these two parables present both promise and warning?

Personal Study Options

It is clear from the various parables we have looked at so far that their primary functions in Jesus' ministry reveals the nature of the Kingdom of God. If Jewish people in the first century A.D. were expecting God's Kingdom to come, why is that they did not accept Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God? What factors in his presentation led many to reject his vision as well as his role in the Kingdom? How does these same factors operate today so that people do not accept Jesus' vision of God's Kingdom? What can we do about this problem?

The Wicked Tenants

(Mark 12:1-11; Matthew 21:33-41; Luke 20:9-19)

The Jerusalem ministry of Jesus has a different character than that which occurred in Galilee. For example, few miracles happen in Jerusalem (other than the resurrection). Parables expressed in Jerusalem tend to focus upon the need for people to be prepared for the return of the Son of Man, rather than the current nature of the Kingdom of God. One thing that does remain fairly constant is the conflict Jesus has with the religious authorities. The parable of the Wicked Tenants finds expression in this situation of conflict.

In Mark's Gospel the day after Jesus has 'cleansed the Temple', he returns to Jerusalem and the various religious groups begin to fire questions at him. The first group to engage him is the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders (12:27). They challenge him to declare the authority that he uses to justify his actions. Their refusal to agree with him that God is his authority paves the way for the parable of the Wicked Tenants. They know the correct answer to their question, but they are unwilling to admit it. So Jesus warns them of God's judgment should they persist in their antagonism against "the beloved son".

Several times earlier in Mark's Gospel Jesus told parables to the religious leaders directly (2:19-22; 3:23-27) or indirectly (7:14-15). The parable of the Wicked Tenants is the longest and most developed parable that Jesus proclaims to them. In many ways it echoes Isaiah's "song of the vineyard" (Isaiah 5) and similarly presents an oracle of prophetic judgment in its telling. Jesus emphasizes its prophetic nature by concluding it with the quotation from Psalm 118:22,23. Immediately the religious leaders know that Jesus "had spoken the parable against them" (12:12). Whether this means they fully grasped the message it contained is uncertain, but they surely sensed the key theme of divine judgment. They are so incensed that they would have arrested him on the spot as he taught in the temple if the presence of the crowds had not deterred them. What makes them so angry?

As we saw with the parable of the Four Soils in Mark 4, the longer, more complex parables that Jesus told seem to have more allegorical development. In other words, the various elements in them (i.e. in this case the identity of the tenant farmers, the servants, the vineyard, etc.) have quite specific meanings. In this case the sense becomes so apparent in the telling that Jesus does not have to provide a separate explanation of its meaning. The various elements probably have the following sense:

the owner of the vineyard.....God (as in Isaiah 5)
the vineyardIsrael (as in Isaiah 5)
the tenant farmersIsraelite Leaders (as in Isaiah 5)
the harvest timetime of accountability
the various servants sent to collect rent.....the OT prophets, including John

the mistreatment of the servantsIsrael's rebellious attitude to God
the son whom the owner loved⁴Jesus
the destruction of the vineyard by the ownerthe judgment against Jerusalem
the others.....the apostles and church leaders

If these identities are correct, then this parable becomes in effect a condensed version of Israel's history. God created His people, preparing a special place for them. Leaders were appointed to maintain their allegiance. However, the leaders became corrupt. Despite constant attempts by God to call them to account, including the prophets, the exile, and more recently John the Baptist, their attitude basically has not changed. They reject and refuse God's attempts to exercise His lordship over them. Essentially, they want to rule themselves, to take over the vineyard.

God will not let them. When He sends finally His own beloved Son and they kill him, they squander the last opportunity God provides for their repentance. He promises to come and destroy these leaders. The management of the vineyard, i.e. God's people, will pass into the hands of others. Presumably this represents the apostles and subsequent disciples of Jesus Christ.

Jesus underlines the message of this parable by concluding with the quotation from Psalm 118:22-23.⁵ Apparently there was some tradition in Israel related to a well-known building project in which a stone pronounced unfit for usage eventually ends up being used as the most important stone in the entire structure. The Psalmist uses this illustration to praise God for His actions to reverse the affects of evil people in his life. Instead of his life being considered worthless, suddenly, by God's deliberate intent, his life finds remarkable new meaning and significance. Jesus regards this as a messianic prophecy, anticipating his own experience of rejection by people, but his election by God. Although the Jewish leaders and many of his own people refuse to acknowledge him as the Messiah, God knows him and will establish him in his rightful position as "the cornerstone". In Matthew's Gospel, a further word is added at the end of the parable affirming that such rejection causes God to "take away the kingdom of God" and it is "given to a people who will produce its fruit" (21:43)

There is perhaps a play on words contained in this parable. The Hebrew word for "son" is BEN and the word for stone is EBEN. Jesus, the son (BEN) of God becomes the foundation stone (EBEN) that God chooses as the base for His new temple, His new people.

We also need to consider this parable in the light of Jesus' action to condemn the temple as a polluted place, no longer fulfilling its divine function as "the house of prayer for all nations." In Mark 13:1-2 Jesus foretells the destruction of this magnificent structure. He promises that God

⁴ Three times in Mark's Gospel Jesus is identified as God's beloved son – here, in 1:11 and 9:7.

⁵ This OT prophecy became very important for the church's understanding of Jesus and Israel's rejection of their Messiah. It is used in Acts 4:11; Eph. 2:20 and 1 Peter 2:7.

will provide a replacement, but it will be a spiritual temple, a new divine house for which his own life and ministry provide the foundation.⁶ What God does through Jesus to prepare this new dwelling is all part of His plan. Even though it includes suffering, rejection and death, this messianic sacrifice also provides the "ransom for many", the "blood poured out for the new covenant", and the basis for forgiveness.

The tragedy of this entire event is that the religious leaders should acknowledge this as true because they study the same Scriptures as Jesus but refuse to come to the same conclusions. Despite all that Jesus does and teaches, they willfully refuse to accept his authority as originating with God and so they determine to kill him. The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple at the hands of the Romans in AD 66-70 in some sense perhaps implements the judgmental action of God against these 'tenants'.

This parable is one of the most powerful and sobering stories that Jesus tells. Its message encompasses the history of salvation, including the terrible refusal of human beings to accept God's overtures of love and mercy. While the immediate reference is to Israel's long history of rebellion documented in its own Scriptures, the key principles certainly have application to our own situations, both corporately and personally.

God entrusts His church with His kingdom ministry. His Holy Spirit teaches, guides, and provides for us so that we can truly represent Him here. But what happens when we forget to listen, or worse refuse to hear His word? What happens when our human grasp for power, prestige, and security get in the way of God's agenda? Will God give the vineyard to others? Perhaps the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3 give us some perspective on this issue, as God warns them that He will remove their candle from the lampstand if they demonstrate consistent unfaithfulness.

When we apply these principles to our personal lives, they hit even harder. God has given us the stewardship of our lives. How do we treat His demands for accountability? Often, I think, we ignore them or consider them irrelevant. We tell God to get lost, in so many words. But God keeps coming back to warn, urge, persuade us to respond to His truth. Yes, at some point perhaps God will refuse to continue. Who can say when that point is reached, but it remains a sobering possibility. Consider Jesus' warning in Matthew 21:44.

On the positive side, as we do respond and build our lives upon the chief cornerstone, we will enjoy the commendation of God. His work in Jesus truly is marvelous and deserving of our praise. When we become part of this new temple construction, we also share in this blessing.

Questions to Stimulate Discussion

1. Who is the primary audience for Jesus' parable in Mark 12:1-11? How does this fact help us in our interpretation of the parable of the Wicked Tenants?

⁶ Consider Peter's language in 1 Peter 2:4-10.

2. In what other settings did Jesus tell parables specifically for the Jewish religious leaders (cf. Mark 2:19-22; 3:23-27; 7:14-15)?
3. Read Isaiah 5:1-7. How does this 'song of Isaiah' parallel Jesus' parable? Compare the outcomes in both stories. What does Jesus want the religious leaders to understand through this parable?
4. This is a long parable and the development lends itself to an allegorical understanding. If it is correct to see this parable as condensed version of Israelite history, what is Jesus saying about that history?
5. Who are the "others" whom the owner will put in charge of his vineyard (12:9; cf. Matthew 21:43)? How does this conclusion fit with Jesus' prophecies in Mark 13?
6. Jesus concludes this parable with a quote from Psalm 118:22-23. How is this portion of Scripture relevant to Jesus' message and this parable in particular?
7. We often see parables as stories promising salvation? How does this parable function as story forecasting judgment?
8. Is Jesus' message still relevant for us today? How and why?

Personal Study Options

One of the difficult issues in the Gospel stories is why the Jewish religious leaders rejected Jesus. In the parable of the Wicked Tenants Jesus does speak to this issue. What are the motivating factors that he identifies in this parable? What did these 'wicked tenants' think they would achieve by killing the heir? Was this expectation realistic? Why not? What was the chief fallacy in their thinking? How does this fallacy still operate today in the minds of many human beings?

The Sprouting Fig Tree

(Mark 13:28-31; Matthew 24:32-35; Luke 21:29-33)

We all have an insatiable desire to know the future. As we have entered this new millennium, such speculation is reaching fever pitch in some circles. Have you noticed the sudden explosion of titles about this subject in the Christian bookstores? It is hard for us as believers on the one hand to keep watchful and vigilant for the second coming as Jesus commands, and on the other hand acknowledge that we do not know when it will happen. We conveniently forget Jesus' admonition to his followers in Acts 1:7 that "it is not for [us] to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority." It is teaching such as we find in Mark 13:28-31, however, which suggests that we can discern some clues as to the 'nearness' of this climactic event, even though we might not pinpoint the exact 'day or hour'.

At the end of Jesus' longest section of teaching (Mark 13) that Mark records in his narrative, Jesus uses several parables. In verses 34-37 Jesus tells a parable about an absent landlord as a way of emphasizing the importance of his disciples always being ready for his promised return. In Matthew's Gospel the whole of chapter 25 records three, extensive parables related to this theme of Christ's return and the need to be ready. Obviously this is an extremely important matter and Jesus' repeated teaching about it underlines its significance. The parable of the sprouting fig tree in Mark 13:28-31 (and parallels) focuses, however, upon our ability to discern symptomatic changes which point to the return of the Messiah.

This is the second time during his last week of ministry in Jerusalem that Jesus uses the fig tree to teach a principle. In chapter 11 Mark tells us how Jesus cursed a fig tree and caused it to die because he sought something to eat from it and found it barren (11:12-26). In the midst of this 'miracle' we learn about Jesus' condemnation of Israel's religious leaders because they have failed to preserve and promote God's holy character in the very place dedicated to His worship and service, namely the temple. Jesus' prophetic actions and words pronounce judgment upon the temple and its leaders. The cursing and destruction of the fig tree is a parabolic action that illustrates what God will do to His own temple. In this instance the fig tree in some sense stands for Israel and its failure to fulfill its God-given mission.

When we come to Mark 13:28 and find Jesus telling Peter, Andrew, James and John to "learn this lesson [i.e. parable] from the fig tree", is Jesus similarly specifically identifying Israel with the fig tree? This is a natural question. Here again, however, I would suggest that the more immediate context would indicate that this identification is neither warranted nor necessary. Of course, the entire discourse in chapter 13 does relate to Israel. Jesus forecasts the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem, as well as the completion of his commission to his disciples and his return in glory. However, the fig tree comparison in this context follows immediately upon Jesus' promise that "the Son of Man" will come "in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send

his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven." Within the parable itself Jesus states: "when you see these things happening, you know...." So the fig tree is not an allegory for Israel per se, but rather the changes that occur in the annual cycle of the fig tree generally, become a comparison for the changes which people will observe as the time for the events described in this chapter gets closer.

We should remember that Jesus' discourse arises as a response to the disciples' question in vs. 4: "Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?" Similarly in vs. 14 Jesus has said: "when you see...then let those who are in Judea flee...." When this same wording emerges in vs. 29 ("Even so, when you see these things happening, you know...."), it strongly suggests that Jesus wants this parable to address this issue of schedule and proximity as it relates to the prophesied judgment upon Jerusalem and its temple.

The parable of the fig tree⁷ is very short – only one verse (28), followed by several verses (29-30) of explanation and application. I have suggested several times in these studies that in such cases of short, condensed comparisons, the focus is upon the general nature of the action and not the meaning of specific elements contained within the analogy. The key idea is the ability of people in Palestine to judge the proximity of the summer season from the fresh growth that appears on fig trees. Fig trees are deciduous and only when the warm weather is certain will it produce its fresh crop of leaves. So the appearance of leaves proves that summer is coming and that it is near. Issues of sequence and proximity receive focus here.

Jesus' message in this parable then seems clear. The appearance of the "abomination of desolation" in particular seems to be the key event that should warn Jesus' followers that the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple is imminent. He also asserts that this will happen within the lifetime of those who are present with him. "This generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened." History has verified Jesus' prophesy because Jerusalem and its temple were burned and completely destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70, scarcely forty years after this oracle was proclaimed.⁸ The critical question focuses upon the ability of the disciples to recognize what the 'abomination which causes desolation' refers to. This is the event which seems to be the trigger for the terrible judgment which Jesus' forecasts.

It is after these events that the Son of Man will return in power and glory. And here is where Jesus' teaching introduces another new element. Jewish expectations surrounding the Messiah's coming predicted that his presence would herald almost immediate action by God to eradicate evil and restore Israel to its 'proper' place as the people of God. Jesus, however, details a different scenario. Jerusalem and the temple would be destroyed in judgment. The Gentiles

⁷ The setting of Jesus' speech is the Mount of Olives, famous for its large and ancient fig trees, which would grow in maturity to about 35 feet in height. Passover is very near and the fig trees at this time of year would be in the condition that Jesus is describing, with its branches tender and leaves sprouting.

would hear the Gospel and respond, becoming part of God's special people. After these events, but we do not know how long after, the Son of Man will return "with great power and glory". Verses 32-37 deal with the problem of this gap in time between these first stages of judgment and the last stages of the Son of Man's glorious return. We note how carefully and frequently Jesus asserts that no one, neither human being, nor angel, nor even the Son of God, knows when this great day will happen. God, the Father, alone knows and He has set the date.

- "no one knows about that day or hour" (vs. 32)
- "you do not know when that time will come" (vs. 33)
- "you do not know when the owner of the house will come back" (vs.35).

How much clearer could Jesus be?

So I would suggest that the parable of the sprouting fig tree is Jesus' warning to his followers to be ready for God's action regarding Jerusalem and the temple. They should not think that these horrendous events, as earth-shaking as they will be, spell the decision of God to wrap up history. As in previous events of Israelite history God acts to save or to judge His people. Similarly in these events we discern both elements wrapped together. His gospel goes into all the world so that all peoples will have opportunity to 'enter the kingdom'. This is salvation. But there is also judgment upon those who reject and the catastrophe prophesied here about Jerusalem is part of that message. The fig tree analogy, then, does not specifically apply to the appearance of the Son of Man. This history-ending event will occur, but we have no idea as to when it will occur. As Jesus keeps telling his disciples, "the end is not yet" even with wars, earthquakes and great persecutions (vs. 7, 13). What Jesus has done is "told you everything ahead of time". The responsibility of Jesus' disciples is to be ready, watching, and prepared when these events do occur.

This parable:

- g. reinforces our trust in the accuracy, authority, and truthfulness of Jesus' words. If what he said about Jerusalem and the temple came true, then what he promised about the return of the Son of Man will also come true;
- h. we need to be very careful not to be swept up into speculations about the immediacy of the Son of Man's return. We must be passionate in our expectation, but not absorbed in trying to discern its timing. We are told by Jesus himself that this is unknowable and not our business. We must focus upon witness, readiness ,and service;
- i. we must take seriously the warnings of Jesus. If we disregard them, then we too shall experience God's judgment. If we accept them and respond to them, then we shall experience God's salvation.

⁸ Traditionally, one generation in Israel would be a forty year period.

Questions to Stimulate Discussion

1. How does the context of Mark 13 influence our interpretation of the parable of the Sprouting Fig Tree?
2. Do you think this parable has anything to do with Jesus' cursing of the fig tree in Mark 11:12f? Why? Is the reference for the fig tree the same in both cases? Why? How does the context of Mark 13 help us answer this question?
3. This is a very short parable. What principle of interpretation normally is operative when dealing with a short parable?
4. How does this parable relate to the issue of the "return of the Son of Man in glory?"
5. What does Jesus emphasize in vs. 32, 33, and 35? Why is this necessary?
6. If Jesus is warning his followers to be ready for his return, what relevance does this warning continue to have for followers of Jesus today?

Personal Study Options

Matthew includes the parable of the Ten Wise and Foolish Virgins in his account of Jesus' last discourse (Matthew 25:1-13). Read this parable and compare its message to the parable of the Sprouting Fig Tree. What is the same and what is different? Why do you think Jesus felt it necessary to emphasize this message by using diverse parables? What does it say to us today about the importance of this question?

The Two Builders

(Matthew 7:24-27 and Luke 6:46-49)

The 'Sermon on the Mount' in Matthew 5-7 (with parallel teaching in Luke 6 and other places) explains the qualities of the disciple that Jesus is looking for. The Beatitudes which preface Jesus discourse summarize these qualities and the remainder of the speech is commentary upon them. Throughout, the theme of obedient living based upon faith in God keeps surfacing. Belief and action together shape the life of the disciple. For example, if disciples are 'light' then people must 'see your good deeds'(5:16); 'whoever practices...these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven'(5:19); 'be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men' (6:1). Active faith, belief in God that affects behaviour, this is the nature of discipleship Jesus teaches.

As he concludes his discourse, Jesus uses several parables to define more clearly the choice that women and men have. He tells about the two ways (the narrow one leads to life and the broad one leads to destruction 7:13-14); he describes the two trees (good trees produce good fruit and bad trees produce bad fruit 7:15-20); and finally the two builders (the wise one who builds on rock and the foolish one who builds on sand 7:24-27). Again the theme of 'doing' permeates Jesus' teaching. Jesus warns his listeners that "only he who does the will of my Father who is heaven" will enter the kingdom of heaven (7:21). It may sound as if Jesus is preaching a "good works" gospel. In every case, however, Jesus presumes that a relationship with God already is established and that obedient actions are the product of this prior relationship. Jesus' voluntary sacrifice of himself on the cross forms the basis for the forgiveness of our sins and our relationship with God.

The parable of the two builders in Matthew's Gospel begins with the conjunction 'therefore' (7:24). In some sense then it serves to provide more explanation, a solid rationale for Jesus' previous statements in 7:21-23, or perhaps even for the entire Sermon on the Mount. It seems logical then to look to this teaching of Jesus as the context within which to understand the primary message of the parable of the two builders.

In 7:21-23 Jesus looks forward to the judgment day when all people will give an account to God for their actions. He talks about "that day" and he describes people giving explanations about their lives that for them provide a sufficient basis for 'entering the kingdom'. Jesus, as the judge, the Lord, will deny them entrance because he says, "I never knew you". Despite their use of Jesus' name as the authority for their religious activities, Jesus denies that they were doing the "will of my Father who is in heaven." In other words, it is possible to sound spiritual, to act spiritual, and to have some spiritual experiences and still not be a disciple of Jesus because true, heart-rooted obedience to God is still missing. An early church writing called the *Didache* warns: "But not everyone who speaks in the Spirit is a prophet, except he have the behaviour of the

Lord." It is true that no one ever enters the kingdom of God based only upon obedience, but it is equally true that life in the kingdom of God requires sincere obedience. We are not only saved by grace, but genuine grace works in the believer's life to produce obedience. From antiquity we find magical spells that include the names of Jehovah and Jesus as people attempted to use Jesus' power in a magical way without understanding the significance of discipleship. So this is the context, then, of the parable of the two builders – what kind of spiritual activity really counts for God?

Jesus sets forth the key issue, which this parable explains, at the very beginning: "everyone who *hears* these words of mine and puts them into practice..."(7:24). Three elements immediately become apparent. First, Jesus places his words and teachings as the central issue. There may be many teachers and many prophets, but in the end it is the words of Jesus that become the touchstone, the ultimate guide for true discipleship. If we ignore, change, or selectively choose among his teachings, then we are not hearing and doing in the way he demands. Second, the imperative of hearing and doing is necessary for everyone and is open to everyone. No one will discover an alternative method by which to enter the kingdom. There is only one way. Conversely, there is no human status a person must achieve in order to be eligible for entry. All who put their confidence in God and believe that Jesus Christ is Lord may enter. Thirdly, entry into and continuous life in the kingdom of God is based upon hearing with understanding and obedient response. As James says later on in the New Testament, we must not only be hearers of the word, but also doers. In this he echoes Jesus' basic principle.⁹

Within the parable Jesus talks about two classes of people, the wise and the foolish. These categories are not new, but frequently occur in the Old Testament, particularly the book of Proverbs. There, the fool emerges as an individual who has no fear or reverence for God, who has little self-control, who gets swept up in every kind of evil endeavour, and who in the end loses everything. Conversely, the wise person knows God and respects Him, seeks to obey His laws, has an understanding of the world that provides stability, and even though life may be hard now, in the end there is security with God. Some of the Psalms similarly address this contrast and declare that "the fool has said in his heart, 'there is no God'". The word that Jesus uses to describe the "wise person" suggests someone who is sensible, prudent, thoughtful. He is not describing a class of philosophers, but ordinary people determined to understand the meaning of life.

Jesus compares the wise person to a builder who decides to construct a house and prudently chooses as the foundation "the rock" (the same word which lies behind Peter's name. cf. Matthew 16:18). Given the environment in Palestine where the hills are cut by many dry

⁹ I would suggest that this same principle emerges in the parable of the four soils (Mark 4) as Jesus outlines the various responses to the "word". Only that response which produces fruit is the legitimate and suitable

stream beds (wadis), the picture seems to be that this person constructs a house in the safest place. If floods do come, the structure will not be washed away. Jesus assumes in this story that ferocious storms will arise as an inevitable feature of life. If he is using the previous teaching about the judgment day as the context for his parable, then perhaps the storm is a symbol for this time of accountability. Because of this person's wise, initial decision to build on the rock, the house remains secure during the fiercest storm and 'does not fall'. Its foundation preserves it. So, hearing and doing Jesus' words result in security, i.e. entering the kingdom of heaven, at the time of judgment, 'that day' when God will require an accounting from every human being.

On the other side of the equation we discover the foolish person – obstinate, godless and just plain stupid. This is not a complimentary term. Jesus has warned his followers not to use this term in speaking of other people (5:23-24) because it is so derogatory and inflammatory. Presumably Jesus uses it here for literary effect – to shock his listeners and cause them to think about the way they are living. The second builder selects the flat, sandy soil of the floodplain for the foundation of the house. Of course, when the first winter storm comes, the dry wadi fills with rushing water and the house is destroyed. There was no foresight in the selection. While it may have looked good when the sun was shining, even the slightest visual observation of the area and a moment's thought should have revealed its deadly reality. The end result is the great crash of the house. Nothing is left; it is all washed away in the flood which courses through the wadi. Such is the person who hears Jesus words "but does not put them into practice." Again, while this principle applies in many aspects of life, there is undoubtedly an eschatological urgency to Jesus' words. When the storm of God's judgment comes and accountability is required, this foolish person who pays no heed to Jesus' words suffers the worst catastrophe imaginable – banishment from God's kingdom.

Jesus, as he concludes his teaching, clearly defines what is at stake in his teaching and mission. Discipleship, life in the kingdom, and positive, believing response to his words provide the only secure, sensible reaction to Jesus' message that any human being should have. When you evaluate everything, not just in terms of this life, but also eternity, is there really a choice to be made? The only thoughtful, sensible action is to say yes to God and in thankful obedience demonstrate our love for Him and His Son. Life is too precious to squander in foolish endeavours. We need to hear Jesus' words and put them into practice. Here is true wisdom.

Questions to Stimulate Discussion

1. What is the general theme of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7)?
2. As Jesus concludes this Discourse what becomes the focus of his message? How does he seek to drive home his key point?

response. Some other responses do produce limited growth, but only one of the four described results in fruit. There is a lot of hearing, but only a little doing.

3. What does the word "therefore" in Matthew 7:24 suggest about the meaning of the parable of The Two Builders intended by Jesus? How does the content of 7:21-23 also contribute to our understanding of this parable?
4. In 7:24 Jesus states explicitly the primary point of the comparison. What is it and how does this statement help us to understand this parable?
5. How would you define the two classes of people Jesus describes in the parable? What is the spiritual status of each category? Why?
6. In what ways does the Scripture's description of our human condition fit this very brief story told by Jesus?
7. What does Jesus say is at stake in his teaching and mission for us a human beings? Why is this the case?
8. How would you classify yourself according to this parable? Why?

Personal Study Options

Take a concordance and trace how the book of Proverbs defines the wise person in contrast to the foolish person. As you reflect upon the parable of The Two Builders, do you perceive any connection between these two characters as expressed in Proverbs and Jesus' categories? What do you learn from this comparison?

The Parable of the Weeds

(Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43)

In comparison to Mark, Matthew has about twice the number of parables. Matthew 13, for example, which parallels Mark 4, has seven parables whereas Mark narrates perhaps four.¹⁰ One of the parables special to Matthew is that told about the weeds sown in the midst of the wheat field. In Matthew's account this follows immediately after the explanation of the parable of the four soils. Common elements between them include the activities of the 'evil one', the symbolic use of similar elements such as sowing seeds, growth, weeds, etc., and the fact of harvest. Yet the stories are different and express quite different ideas. Fortunately, this is one of the cases where Jesus, in direct response to the request from his disciples, agrees to explain the meaning of the parable (vs. 36-43). Probably, if we were to admit it, we would never have imagined that the message of this parable was so detailed and significant. Jesus' disciples certainly thought something important was being communicated, but they had no idea what it was.

Matthew hints at this significance in that he quotes from Psalm 78:2 just prior to narrating Jesus' interpretation:

I will open my mouth in parables,

I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world. (Matthew 13:35)

Parables do provide a medium through which God chooses to reveal critical wisdom, "things hidden since the creation of the world." No one has heard these things; God has kept them secret until Jesus came (cf. 13:16-17). Jesus' disciples sensed this and determined to learn what these might be. Such is the significance of parables even today. We learn the very secrets of God! How vital, then, that we exercise diligence to understand them as clearly as possible.

Jesus tells his listeners at the start of this parable that once again it reveals something about 'the kingdom of heaven' (vs.24). Personally, I think the expressions 'kingdom of heaven' and 'kingdom of God' refer to the same entity. As we discern elsewhere in Jesus' teaching, aspects of God's sovereign rule are present now, but other aspects will be enjoyed only in the future. In Jesus' interpretation of this parable we observe a similar 'present—future' understanding of the Kingdom. I would suggest that Jesus' primary point in this parable is the certainty of the harvest, i.e. the full success of God's plans for the Kingdom despite apparent delays and all the opposition that the evil one, the devil, seeks to generate against God.

¹⁰ Mark records one parable in chapter 4 which Matthew does not relate, the parable of the sleeping farmer. So we have in fact a total of eight different parables to compare between these chapters; perhaps more, if we include Mark 4:21-25. Reasons for these variations differ. Some would suggest that Mark knew more than he wrote, but space or some other factors led him to be more selective than Matthew. Others suggest that Matthew had access to more information. These additional parables were also spoken in this discourse

The story line is quite straightforward (vs. 24-30). Having completed a good day's work in planting his fields with good seed, a farmer sleeps through the night. His enemy takes advantage of his absence from the field and plants weed seeds in the same field. The repeated reference to the enemy highlights his important role. No motivation is given for this action. The farmer remains unaware of this until the plants begin to grow. The farmer's servants discern the problem. Presumably the amount of weeds was quite extraordinary to prompt consideration of pulling them all out. Wisely, the farmer tells them to let things take their natural course. Destroying the weeds at this point will in fact harm the good seed, something he wants to avoid. At harvest time he will segregate the wheat from the weeds, keeping the former and burning the latter. Perhaps it was common custom to pull weeds as soon as possible in order to give the grain the best chance to mature. In this case the deliberate decision of the owner to leave things as they are until harvest might be considered rather unusual.

When we turn to Jesus' interpretation (vs. 36-43), some key features require emphasis. First of all, Jesus states explicitly that the 'field is the world' (vs. 38). Many preachers argue that Jesus must have been referring to the church and the fact that it is a mixed multitude of saved and sinners. While that may be an inference from this parable, it is probably not the primary message. Here Jesus indicates the scope of his mission is the whole world. Within this arena the sons of the Kingdom and the sons of the evil one co-exist. It is part of our role as sons of the kingdom to live shoulder to shoulder with those whose allegiance is given to the devil. There is no escaping it. Rather, this is how we fulfill our mission.

Secondly, we see two primary actors – the Son of Man who creates the 'sons of the kingdom' and the devil who creates 'the sons of the evil one'. Both are at work in the world, seeking recruits to their cause. The devil is the 'enemy' in that he opposes the purposes of the Son of Man. Those who align themselves with Jesus necessarily oppose the work of satan and become his targets. Until the time of harvest the 'seed planting' goes on continuously under the direction of these two, very different leaders. But having said this, Jesus very carefully asserts his lordship over this world. He calls the world "his kingdom" (vs. 41). This language suggests that the Kingdom in some sense is present now as Jesus our Lord exercises His powerful mission in this world through His Holy Spirit. Yet, Jesus also declares that his followers will be "in the kingdom of their Father" after the time of judgment. This additionally suggests a future element to our experience of God's Kingdom.

Third, Jesus emphasizes that the future, glorious reign of God expected by His Jewish followers and compatriots would be delayed. Before it arrived the conflict between the Messianic community and the kingdom of satan would be intensive. Even though Jesus was Messiah truly, his first advent did not signal the inauguration of the perfect, righteous, peaceful world in which

(of which Mark was ignorant) or he chose to place these parables in this context with others to illustrate

God's chosen people, Israel, exercised triumphant oversight. Rather His first advent inaugurated a period of intense struggle for those who give their allegiance to Him. Satan, the enemy, will do his best to create havoc, harm and hurt to God's people and plans. This perspective was quite new to Jesus' contemporaries and contributed significantly to His rejection as Messiah by the religious leaders. This paradigm did not fit their expectations at all.

Finally, Jesus tells us that 'this age' has a limited span. He gives no hint as to its duration or when it will come to an end, at least at this point. Certainly, he declares plainly that a 'harvest time', a day of judgment and assessment by God of human actions and loyalty will occur, with the angels being primary agents in God's sifting process. On the one hand, those who cause sin and offense will be eliminated from God's wonderful future. Human actions plainly have eternal consequences. On the other hand, those who are 'righteous' by God's gracious work at the cross will "shine like the sun in the kingdom of the Father". This language is reminiscent of that used to describe the change which overcomes Jesus at His transfiguration. Glory marks their future experience with God.

So Jesus reveals to His followers these secrets about the Kingdom. It has various phases. The struggle with evil will continue during phase one, but will be eliminated in phase two. He identifies clearly the nature of the spiritual struggle that we will experience during the first phase. Conversely, He warns those who choose the life of sin and offence that they will face severe suffering and punishment in the second phase of the Kingdom. Overall, God will be triumphant and the Son of Man, Jesus Himself, is the agent of God's purposes both in the first phase and the second.

Thus Jesus urges His followers to faithful perseverance in discipleship. The end will certainly justify the struggles of today. We have the promise that God will share His glory with us. Also, we discern the reality of Hell, satan and evil once again.

Questions to Stimulate Discussion

1. What are some of the common elements that occur in the parable of "The Sower and the Seed" and the parable of "The Weeds" as recounted in Matthew 13?
2. Why do you think Jesus provides explanations for both of these extended parables?
3. What does Jesus' quotation of Psalm 78:2 just prior to his interpretation of the parable of "The Weeds" suggest about the importance of this parable and his explanation?
4. In 13:24 Jesus mentions the phrase "Kingdom of Heaven". What clue does this provide for the key application of this parable?
5. When Jesus says that "the field is the world", how does this shape our interpretation of the parable? Who is the enemy that sows the weeds?

6. Who are the two primary actors in this story and how does Jesus interpret them? What do the relations between these actors suggest about the condition of our world today?
7. What does this parable suggest about the second coming of the Messiah? How does Jesus' teaching about this differ from that of his Jewish contemporaries, i.e. his own followers?
8. What does Jesus say about the nature of 'this age' and its 'end'? How should this knowledge influence our personal actions and decisions today?
9. What 'secrets of the Kingdom' has Jesus shared in this parable? Summarize them.

Personal Study Options

In the parables of Jesus we discern key features of his 'theology'. Using the parables of "the Weeds", explain some of the primary features of Jesus' theology. What does he believe about the problem of evil, the nature of God, the role of his followers in this world, the way the world will end and what follows, etc. Go back and reflect on the parables you have studied previously and add other key features. To what degree should Jesus' theology define our Christian worldview today? Why?

The Labourers in the Vineyard *(Matthew 20:1-16)*

As we become more familiar with Jesus' parables, we discover how central the theme of the Kingdom of God is within them. Sometimes Jesus reveals some new aspect concerning the operation or effectiveness of the Kingdom, but on other occasions he uses the parable to explain the values by which God rules in His Kingdom. In other words the ethics of Kingdom living become the point of the comparison. Sometimes these ethical issues pertain to disciples (cf. Matthew 18:23ff and the matter of forgiveness); but sometimes God's ethics or values become the point at issue. The Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard, or perhaps more aptly titled "The Eccentric Employer" (Matthew 20:1-16) seems to fit this latter category.

Jesus had started on his way to Jerusalem at the beginning of chapter 19. As his final days of ministry conclude, Jesus' teaching focus shifts to the issue of discipleship. Again and again he uses various means and strategic teaching moments to help his followers understand more fully what discipleship really means in terms of Kingdom living and Kingdom principles. As this chapter concludes, Jesus has finished his amazing and somewhat tragic dialogue with the rich young man. The comments Jesus makes about the difficulty which many people, but particularly wealthy people, have in entering the Kingdom has raised considerable consternation among Jesus' followers. They wonder who can ever be saved? Jesus assures them that God makes this possible and those who sincerely and sacrificially follow Jesus will be saved (cf. vs.26-29). He concludes with this rather mysterious claim: "But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first" (vs. 30).¹¹ Presumably earthly wealth is no indicator of heavenly treasure. Luke's parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus makes the same point. It is within this context of 'discipleship and its meaning' that the parable in Matthew 20:1-16 must be set. Unfortunately our chapter divisions lead us to overlook this connection quite frequently.

As Jesus concluded his discussion about discipleship in chapter 19, he assured his followers that God would reward those who "left everything and followed him" (vs. 28-29). Some kinds of rewards would be experienced in this life and some in the life to come, i.e. eternal life. One group of disciples would be involved in assisting the Son of Man exercise and mete out judgment at the last day. Others would be given other tasks to complete. The division of labour and the provision of rewards were entirely at God's discretion. But however it is measured, God will certainly be seen as incredibly generous. So the basic question that the parable addresses is how just and generous God will be to the followers of Jesus when the Son of Man returns. However, the telling of the parable raises some very interesting questions.

¹¹ Note that this same statement is repeated following the parable reported in 20:1-15 as a summarizing application of the parable's meaning.

The story line is quite straightforward. It is harvest time and the owner of a vineyard needs some day-labourers to help him finish the picking of the grapes. So early in the morning and then at 9 am, then again at noon and once more at 3 pm and finally at 5 pm (vs. 1-7) he hires new workers. Whoever is in the town square and seeking work, the vineyard owner offers the opportunity for work, if they will take it. The terms of the contract vary: vs. 2 – the usual daily wage; vs. 3 – what is right. We presume that the same kind of arrangements were made with the other groups. Now at the end of the day it was customary for the laborers to receive their pay. Now we can imagine that some farmers were probably very scrupulous to keep track of how long each one worked in order to pay as little as possible. Maybe there were common stories of farmers who would cheat such peasants and not pay what was even promised. We certainly know that unemployment was common, that there were no trade unions, that there was no employment insurance. Here is where the story takes an unusual twist.

The farmer orders those hired last to be paid first and he ensures that they receive "the usual daily wage" (vs.8). You will note that the farmer gives them an entire day's pay for about one hour's work. What generosity! However, as the other workers come through and receive their pay, they discover that no matter how long they worked, all received the same pay.

Of course, you can imagine immediately what happens. Those who had worked all day and received the same as those who had worked one hour considered this grossly unfair. Somehow they felt they should have received more and we might feel they have some claim. But the farmer tells them plainly that he is paying what they agreed to and in this he is absolutely just (vs. 13). He has kept his bargain entirely. The farmer argues that it is his right to be generous if he chooses to do so. After all, it is his money and his resources.

Now what is the point of this rather extensive story? How does it help us understand more fully the nature of life in the Kingdom and the values that God follows as He rules in His Kingdom? Obviously a basic idea must be that God is like this farmer, and his generosity exceeds our human views of fairness. "No one receives less than they deserve, but some receive far more."¹² There is, of course, some similarity with the key ideas presented in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15). There the younger son received more than he deserved and the older son received what he deserved, and the father's generosity appears to be amazing. But that parable is addressed to the Jewish religious leaders. Here we discover that the same message is being given to Jesus' own followers. Why? What is that they too need to learn?

The parable begins and ends with reference to the statement "the last will be first and the first will be last." Apparently the standards that God follows are not those practiced by human beings. The fact that we naturally tend to side with those in this parable who grumble at the

¹² R. T. France. *Tyndale Commentary on the New Testament. St. Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), page 289.

master's action suggests how hard it is for us to have our 'minds transformed' so that we think like God. What we learn is:

- a. *God does not give 'strict reward for services rendered'*. Whatever He gives us as Jesus' followers is far more than we deserve. None of us can make any special claim on His goodness. He has the right to give whatever He chooses to whomever He chooses. In the end we know that He will be just and fair.
- b. *God does reward loyal service*, but loyal service does not necessarily produce a special reward. At the end of the day we all are 'mere servants'. Those who work in the Kingdom longer will not have any precedence over those who work for a shorter time. Such matters will not be issues in the Kingdom of God. God's grace will insure that we have more than we could ever desire.
- c. *God is always just and fair*. It is His generosity and mercy that surprise us and lead us to construe His exceptional generosity as unfairness. When Jesus forgave the thief on the cross and welcomed him into paradise, does it not seem to us 'unfair' that such a person would receive the same basic reward as a Peter or Paul? Yet this is the wideness of God's mercy. How hard our hearts must be to respond in this way!

Perhaps this same principle could be applied to the discussions that the early church had concerning the inclusion of Gentile Christians within God's Kingdom. Surely the Jewish Christians who had so many privileges from God already would receive greater reward! How hard it must have been for those in the church to affirm that God has no favourites.

We need to remember that in God's Kingdom eternal life is the greatest blessing. Whether we are first or last does not matter, because all in the Kingdom receive this great gift from God. How hard it would be if God followed our standards of mercy! Who of us would ever come close to receiving any rewards from God? The good we might do one day would be wiped out by our failures the next. In Jesus Christ we have forgiveness of our sins and access to God's great inheritance. Let us not be trying to compare ourselves inappropriately with other Christians, either to think we are better or worse. Our focus must be to love God with everything we have and our neighbour as ourselves. We can trust God to be just and generous.

Questions to Stimulate Discussion

1. What is meant by the expression "the ethics of the Kingdom"? Whose ethics are primarily being defined?
2. As you read the parable of "the Labourers in the Vineyard", what elements in the context of Matthew 20:1-16 (material in chapter 19 and the remainder of chapter 20) help to orient us to Jesus' intended message in this parable? What does the content of 19:30 suggest about this?

3. What does the discussion about rewards in 19:28-29 suggest about Jesus' intent in giving this parable?
4. How do you think the disciples reacted to the vineyard owner's actions towards the labourers? How do you respond? Are his actions fair? To what extent does the point of a parable turn on some unexpected action of a key character (consider the action of the father in the parable of "The Prodigal Son")?
5. In what ways does this parable about vineyard workers help us understand an essential principle of Kingdom life? Who is identified as the vineyard owner and what are we learn about him from this parable? Is this important for us today? Why?
6. What does the expression "the last will be first and the first will be last" mean in the light of this parable? How does this principle operate in your life and your relationship with God?
7. Does the teaching of this parable have any relevance today to the way we do church? What would be its application?
8. What is the primary blessing of kingdom life? Are you satisfied with that?

Personal Study Options

Jesus told many of his parables to his followers. The parable of "The Labourers in the Vineyard" is designed to help them understand how God's values structure life in His Kingdom. In particular, it helps a follower of Jesus to understand how her or his current life actions and circumstances relate to Kingdom principles. What other life principles can you define from the parables of Jesus that you have studied? What ethical principles emerge to help us understand how the Kingdom operates, why our lives function as they do, what the role of the Christian community is in our Christian experience, etc.?

The Unforgiving Servant *(Matthew 18:21-35)*

Of all the things which God requires of His people the practice of forgiveness surely ranks as the most difficult. Whether we find ourselves having to seek forgiveness or being asked to grant it, both cause us great turmoil. Asking forgiveness requires us to admit our failure, which is humiliating; granting forgiveness, conversely, forces us to abandon revenge and embrace our enemies, which attacks our pride. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus devotes one of his extended conversations with his disciples to the subject of forgiveness (chapter 18). Interestingly, the context within which Jesus urges the practice of forgiveness is the church.

The question from the disciples which stimulates Jesus' teaching is given in 18:1 – "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" In response, Jesus uses the example of a child's humility to explain how greatness is defined in his kingdom (vs.4). He then shows how such humility will be demonstrated:

- nurturing those who are powerless, weak, and in need and not purposely harming them, causing them to sin (5-9)
- instead of despising 'the little ones', seeking them out and helping them (10-14)
- seeking reconciliation with a disciple who 'sins against you' (15-20)
- practicing forgiveness towards a disciple (21-35).

In setting such standards of behaviour for his disciples¹³, Jesus reminds them that "your Father in heaven" acts in the same way (vs.14, 35).

The parable of the unforgiving servant (vs. 23-35) explains Jesus' response to Peter's question in vs.21 – "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Peter's question arises because Jesus has just described how reconciliation must be practiced within his new kingdom community and this requires forgiveness. Peter wants to know whether there are any limits to this exercise of forgiveness.

D. Carson says that in Jewish practice "a brother might be forgiven a repeated sin three times; on the fourth, there is no forgiveness."¹⁴ Peter's suggestion of seven times would sound extremely generous in the ears of his contemporaries. Jesus' response "seventy-seven times"¹⁵ similarly would appear quite shocking. In saying this, however, Jesus is not devaluing the act of forgiveness, making it meaningless, nor is he setting any upper limits. In essence Jesus states

¹³ The text seems to develop an equation between 'the little ones' and normal followers of Jesus, i.e. disciples.

¹⁴ D. Carson, *Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew (Volume 8)* (Grand Rapids: Zondervans, 1984), 405.

¹⁵ It is probable that Jesus in using this number directly refers back to Lamech's extraordinary vindictiveness recorded in Genesis 4:24, contrasting this with the unlimited forgiveness which he requires of his disciples. Whether we should translate the Greek as 'seventy-seven' or 'seventy times seven' is open to debate. If there is allusion to Genesis 4:24 then the translation 'seventy-seven' would fit the Hebrew text of Genesis more accurately.

that that there is no limit to forgiveness. His rationale for such a declaration emerges in the course of the parable that he immediately shares.

The story in this parable of the Kingdom of Heaven incorporates tremendous exaggeration. First, the ten thousand talent debt of the servant surpasses anything imaginable. In the Old Testament David donated three thousand talents of gold to the temple (1 Chron. 29:4,7). In other words in our currency this person's debt is something like a billion dollars. Further, the generosity of the king, canceling the huge debt, is nothing short of extraordinary. Similarly, the response of this individual to the indebtedness of the fellow-servant (vs. 28) which is one hundred denarii (half a year's pay), i.e. to begin choking him, also seems extreme, given the size of the debt. The plot of the story, then, turns on these rather unusual, but not impossible, human actions and reactions. Servants in this parable probably refer to high-ranking civil servants who are members of this king's court and government.

The plot moves in three stages as three characters interact. In vs. 23-27 the first scene describes the intention of the king to 'settle accounts'. He begins with the person who owes him the most and demands repayment! The language Jesus uses ('a man...was brought') suggests this person is already in prison because of his indebtedness. Because the man is unable to pay, the king threatens to sell him and all his family into slavery and to dispose of everything he owns, in order to gain some return on his debt. In great fear the servant falls on his knees and begs for more time, promising with hopeless enthusiasm to repay everything. To his astonishment the king in mercy relents, cancels the debt, and lets him go.

Act two shifts to the action of the forgiven servant immediately after he has experienced this wonderful release (vs. 28-30). Here the activities of the first scene essentially are repeated, but this time the forgiven servant is in the position of the king, being owed a debt and seeking to settle it. The amount of the debt is one six-hundred-thousandth of the first. The aggressive response of the servant catches us by surprise. We would anticipate that he would exercise some patience, some mercy, having just experienced it himself. To the contrary, he begins personally to beat upon the man, demanding immediate payment and imprisoning the man until he could repay, despite the pleas for patience and declarations that repayment would happen soon. This man's actions make no sense given his recent release. Irrationality emerges here, along with inconsistency.

The last scene (vs. 31-34) turns on the fact that the king learns in detail from other 'servants' how this forgiven man has acted. Notice that his activity has caused them 'great distress', i.e. they are shocked and appalled, their sense of kingdom justice disturbed. The master (i.e. the king) immediately recalls the servant and addresses him as 'wicked servant'. His failure to forgive his fellow servant has demonstrated his evil nature. There was some expectation on the part of the master that his action might motivate others in his kingdom to act with similar mercy. The failure of this servant to respond appropriately is punished severely by the torturers,

until he repays his original ten thousand talent debt. The size of the debt and the impossibility of repayment imply that the punishment is interminable.

Jesus concludes the parable with the key to its interpretation, applying it directly to Peter's question:

"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart." (vs. 35)

With these words Jesus links the action of the king/master directly with God Himself, as well as the actions of the servants with his disciples. On the one hand, our indebtedness to God exceeds anything we can hope to repay. Justly, when God demands payment, we deserve to be imprisoned because we have no means to repay our debts to Him. When God decides to cancel our debt in response to our pleas for mercy, this comes as total surprise – something which fills us with joy, tremendous gratitude, and the opportunity, indeed the mandate, to express to others what we ourselves have experienced. Even if we discover the need to forgive our brothers and sisters seventy-seven times, this is nothing in comparison to the forgiveness that God has and continues to provide to us in respect to our great debt we owe to Him. What does debt refer to? If we relate this back to the Lord's Prayer, probably our sinful personal rebellion against God.

On the other hand, if we do not respond 'from the heart' in granting such forgiveness, we demonstrate that God's expression of mercy to us has not changed us. Our pleas for God's forgiveness really did not show a changed heart. Forgiveness based upon legalism does not characterise the kind of forgiveness God expects to be practiced in His Kingdom community.

Jesus sees no incongruity between God's amazing mercy and His swift justice and punishment. His mercy gains greater credence from the fact that He does exercise justice against those who ignore His mercy. We cannot earn such mercy. Freedom from our debt comes purely because of God's forgiveness. But once we have experienced such mercy, God expects that we would grant such forgiveness towards other disciples. Receiving forgiveness renders us capable of expressing forgiveness. If we do not express it, then it shows we have not truly received it (cf. 6:12, 14-15).

So in God's Kingdom sincere forgiveness will mark all relationships. It is a genuine sign of a changed heart, a heart that has become like God's heart.

Questions to Stimulate Discussion

1. The parable of "The Unforgiving Servant" occurs in Matthew 18. What is the key focus of this chapter and how does this point us to the primary issue this parable is addressing?
2. How does Peter's question in 18:21 suggest about the primary focus of Jesus' parable?
3. How does exaggeration function in this parable to grab our attention? Can you think of other parables where similar kinds of exaggeration occur? Why does Jesus do this?

4. Outline the three stages of this parable's plot. What other parables are structured in this same way? If we can identify this kind of structure in a parable, what help is this in discerning its meaning?
5. What does Jesus' final statement in vs. 35 tell us about the key point of the parable?
6. What are the key ideas about forgiveness in the Kingdom that Jesus wants his followers to understand and to practice? Why is this issue so important for Jesus?
7. How do you understand that relationship between God's mercy, justice and forgiveness? In what ways should our handling of personal relationships follow God's pattern? Is God's way of doing things 'practical'?

Personal Study Options

Compare Jesus' teaching about forgiveness reported in Matthew 6:12, 14-15 with what he teaches in this parable (18:21-35). Define forgiveness according to Jesus' teaching. How in your opinion can this principle of forgiveness serve to define the character of a local church? If it was operational in the life of that church, how would that church be different from other institutions in its community? How does forgiveness influence the way leadership operates in the church or the Christian family?

The Pharisee and the Tax-Collector

(Luke 18:9-14)

In our progressive study of Jesus' parables we have discovered that some he taught to his disciples, some he taught to the crowds, and others he spoke to those who opposed him. The Parable of the Wicked Tenants and the Vineyard Jesus used to criticize the religious leaders in Jerusalem, for example (Mark 12:1-12). In the case of this parable in Luke 18, I am not sure to whom Jesus addressed it specifically. Luke tells us in vs. 1 that Jesus is talking with his disciples in parables. When we move further back into chapter 17 we discover that this instruction of Jesus' disciples has been going on since vs.22. What stimulates his teaching is, however, a question from the Pharisees about the time when the Kingdom of God would come (17:20). Following this question and his answer to it, Jesus has given clear guidance to his disciples about their conduct and expectations as they wait for the Kingdom of God to come. The Parable of the Persistent Widow (18:1-8) seems to urge a persistent faith, enduring till the Son of Man returns (vs.8).

After this parable Jesus turns his attention to "some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else,..." Who are these people? Are they part of Jesus' followers? Are they Pharisees? The story about the parents who bring their children to Jesus follows and in this scene Jesus has to rebuke his disciples for hindering their activities. He warns them that they "must receive the kingdom of God like a child" or else they "will never enter it" (18:17). And so the scenes that bracket this parable involve Jesus' instruction to his disciples.

I would suggest then that probably we are to see the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector similarly addressed to Jesus' disciples. Perhaps among his followers there were those, even as Jesus approached Jerusalem, who still did not fully appreciate the nature of his mission and message. Once again Jesus seeks to help them understand the necessity of faith and dependence upon himself for salvation. The key question is, of course, what is the true basis of innocence and acceptance before God? What can give us confidence that we possess a right relationship with God?

Jesus uses the comparison between two figures, a Pharisee and a tax-collector, as the means by which to impress a particular principle upon his audience. On the one hand, contrary to our assumptions, the audience in Jesus' day naturally would consider the Pharisee the hero. Usually such people were considered 'holy men', part of the most pious movement in first-century Palestine. Everybody, on the other hand, normally would despise a tax-collector and have no sympathy for such a character. He belonged to a profession universally hated. As the representative in some sense of Rome, for a tax-collector even to enter the Temple of God might be considered a sacrilege. To fully appreciate the force of the story we must enter sympathetically into this ancient worldview.

The temple in Jerusalem represents the most holy place in the world for a Jewish person. Community prayers and sacrifice were offered at 9 am and 3 pm daily. Private prayers were permitted at any time. Praying in the temple seems to be a well-versed habit on the part of the Pharisee. He enters the temple, stands up publicly (having been seated and thus in some sense drawing attention), prays out loud for others to hear, and commends himself to God (vs. 11-12).

In the space of two verses the first person reference occurs five times and Jesus says that his prayer to God is 'about himself'. "I thank you, God, that I am such a great guy!" Scrupulously he maintains the law about fasting and tithing, even exceeding what is expected (i.e. fasting twice per week), and his moral behaviour is above reproach. Quite consciously he distinguishes himself from thieves, sinners, adulterers and "even this here tax-collector". You can almost see this person screw up his face in distaste at even the thought of a tax-collector. Surely such a person as this Pharisee must be considered 'righteous' and able to have confidence in God based upon his own conduct. The blessing of God rests upon such Pharisees, doesn't it? God should be impressed with such a moral and religious record, shouldn't He?

In vs. 13 our attention shifts to the tax-collector. His demeanour is quite in contrast to the Pharisee. He remains "at a distance", perhaps at the periphery of the temple precinct in the court of the Gentiles. This reserve suggests a sense of unworthiness or even hesitation in presuming that God might listen to his prayer. His head remains bowed, not lifted in exaltation before God. Physically he is beating his chest as he prays, a sign of deepest grief and used by men usually only to express the strongest emotion. Finally, his prayer pretends no merit or personal reason why God should even listen to him. All he can do is plead for 'atonement', that in some way and for some reason God might be willing to extend forgiveness to him. It is a prayer of full contrition, seeking mercy from God for sins committed. He presents no case why God should forgive, other than God's sheer mercy.

In the Jewish culture of prayer both of these expressions would fit and would seem quite appropriate in the ears of Jesus' contemporaries. A standard Jewish man's prayer around that time would be thanks to God that "he is not a slave, a Gentile, or a woman."¹⁶ Similarly we can find forms of penitent prayer which parallel that of the tax-collector's, particularly in the Dead Sea Scrolls. So when we come to the end of vs. 13, nothing unusual or extraordinary really has occurred. The descriptions would seem realistic and right.

It is verse 14 which conveys the sharp, quite unexpected twist. Jesus poses this question – who among these two men went home in a state of "rightness before God?" The expected answer would be the Pharisee, of course! But this is not Jesus' assessment. He points to the tax-collector and declares him to be "right with God", rather than the Pharisee. The prayer which seeks forgiveness and depends solely upon God's mercy gains vindication from God. It is God

¹⁶ Craig Blomberg. *Interpreting The Parables* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1990), page 257.

Himself who invites us into relationship with Him, but our attitude must express humbleness and complete dependence upon God Who alone has the power to establish such a relationship. Thus people "confident in their own righteousness" find themselves in a most dangerous position. Thinking themselves to be "right with God" based upon their own merits and actions, their very attitude in fact disqualifies them from receiving such vindication. This is the unwelcomed and unvarnished truth according to Jesus Christ. Even among his followers this misconception had to be eradicated.

We then must ask what is the right way to approach God in order to secure vindication and find acceptance and favour with God? Jesus affirms that vindication is possible and achievable. The secret is found in vs. 14:

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

Humility requires us to depend upon God's mercy and favour for forgiveness and restoration. If we think that our activities, our character, or our 'worth' are sufficient to guarantee or secure a right relationship with God, then Jesus says we will be severely disappointed. Comparison with others is not the issue. We might think we are superior spiritually to others, but God knows our hearts. Our thoughts and intents condemn us before God, just as much as sinful actions. As Jesus announces to Zaccheus, the tax-collector, in Luke 19:10, the Son of Man "came to seek and to save what was lost." Humbleness is a declaration of our lostness and acceptance of our need to be rescued. It is Jesus' sacrifice at the cross that is the foundation upon which God extends His mercy, grace and forgiveness to us. For this reason the Christian's confidence rests in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, the Son of God (cf. Ephesians 2:4-18; Romans 3:21-31).

Acceptance with God, then, is a matter of the heart, not appearance or action. The rich young ruler (Luke 18:18-30) might want to depend upon his own ability to keep the commandments and his wealth, but Jesus says that in the end he will lose his soul. So as we contemplate our future, our eternal destiny, we must ask ourselves this serious question – "Do I have acceptance with God?" When God brings His rule into this world with perfect finality, will I be ready? As Jesus warns his disciples at the end of Luke 17, if we think that everything is all right and normal in this world, we will receive a shocking surprise when the Son of Man returns. It is the person who "is humbled under God's might hand" (1 Peter 5:6-7) whom God will exalt. God's grace is given to the humble, not to the proud and self-righteous.

So, we must ensure that we have accepted Jesus' sacrifice as the punishment for our sins if we are going to enjoy the relationship with God which we need and hopefully desire.

Questions to Stimulate Discussion

1. To whom is Jesus addressing the parable of "The Pharisee and the Tax-collector"? What does the context in Luke 18 reveal about this? Why is it important?

2. What does Luke's comment in 18:8 reveal about the key issue that Jesus is seeking to address through this parable?
3. Similarly what does the story of the children that follows and Jesus' warning to his followers in vs. 17 suggest about the significant lesson in this parable?
4. Define in your own words the key issue that Jesus is seeking to address through this parable. Is this still a problem that people wrestle with today? Why?
5. What do you know about Pharisees? What do you know about tax-collectors in first century Palestine? Why can Jesus use these two figures in this kind of contrasting way so effectively? What kinds of things do we need to know about these social/religious categories in order to sense the emotional response that Jesus' listeners would have to his story?
6. Consider the characterization of the Pharisee (vs. 11-12). Would Jesus' description in these verses caused gasps of horror or shouts of approval for this person's religious perspective?
7. What about Jesus' description of the tax-collector? Would people believe such a response would be possible for this kind of person?
8. How does Jesus' conclusion catch his audience by surprise?
9. Based upon Jesus' teaching in this parable, what is the right way to approach God? What does the term "righteous" mean? How does it relate to the need for humbleness?
10. Compare this parable with the story of Zaccheus in Luke 19. How are they similar?
11. How do you respond to Jesus' parable? Why?

Personal Study Options

Investigate more fully the way the Pharisees viewed themselves and why they engaged in their specific worship practices. You might do some research through Bible Dictionaries, do a google search on the internet, etc. Consider why this group opposed Jesus so severely. What was it about Jesus' message that created this antagonism? We need to be careful not to caricature the Pharisees. In general they were pious people and, as Paul describes himself as a Pharisee, zealous for God. What did Jesus find wrong with their understanding of 'righteousness'?

The Shrewd Manager

(Luke 16:1-15)

In this section of his Gospel Luke has clustered a long series of parables (15:1 - 16:15). They begin and end with Jesus in debate with the Pharisees. At the beginning of chapter 15 the Pharisees accuse Jesus of "welcoming sinners and eating with them." When Jesus concludes the parable of the Shrewd Manager, Luke records that the Pharisees "who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus" (16:15). Plainly the criticism from the Pharisees provoked Jesus to speak in parables, but also his parables with their sharp messages in turn stimulated heated responses from the Pharisees. Even though he might address a parable to his disciples (16:1), sometimes the Pharisees were listening to the conversation.

This parable and the one that follows both deal with the issue of wealth -- the first one with a positive message and the second (the Rich Man and Lazarus) with a negative message. This is a good theme to consider as we find our society fully involved in materialism. The key question Jesus is addressing as he talks with his disciples is this: how should his followers properly use the wealth and other resources with which God blesses them? The Pharisees obviously had some very definite opinions about this and Jesus' teaching plainly clashes with their perspective.

As a parable this story of a shrewd manager has aroused many questions. Is Jesus condoning criminal behaviour by telling such a story?¹⁷ Why is shrewdness an appropriate characteristic of Kingdom people? How do the sayings of Jesus that conclude this parable relate to the story itself? We will try to untangle some of these issues and answer some of these questions.

The story itself, as we have observed in other parables Jesus tells¹⁸, unfolds in three scenes. The character of the shrewd manager links all three scenes together. In scene one the owner of the estate fires his manager and requires him to surrender the account books because he was 'wasting his possessions' (vs. 1-2). The lack of any defense speech by the manager shows he is guilty as charged. As scene two progresses, the steward devises a plan whereby he uses the master's resources to insure that his future will be secured (vs. 3-7). He hastily calls in the various tenants who are renting property and who have promised in return to provide a fixed amount of the crop to the owner of the land. Using his authority as the estate-manager, he reduces their contracts by fifty percent, thereby guaranteeing their gratitude and favour when his job concludes. Of course, such a plan risks everything upon the mercy of the master. Failure will bring imprisonment; success will make him a hero. The haste of the activity receives emphasis as

¹⁷ Julian the Apostate in the fourth century used this parable "to assert the inferiority of the Christian faith and its founder" (cf. Kenneth Bailey. *Poet and Peasant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), page 86).

¹⁸ Compare the parable of the Unforgiving Servant in Matthew 18 or the Prodigal Son in Luke 15.

all must be accomplished before the master finds out what is happening. Finally, in the last scene, when the master discovers what the manager has done, instead of being enraged at this huge financial loss, he commends the steward for "acting shrewdly" (vs.8). What choice does he have? His renters, who assume that he has authorized these reductions, are now celebrating and praising his generosity. If he tries to overturn the action of his manager, he will make his renters angry and appear stingy, if not a fool for letting his manager pull such a trick. In a sense the manager's bet on the merciful response of his master is vindicated.

The meaning of this story tantalizes. The action of the master in some sense represents the actions of God. Probably the sense of the comparison is a logical development from the lesser to the greater. It would go something like this: if this clever manager manages to solve his personal crisis by relying on the mercy of a human master, how much more should we be able to trust God to help us in mercy to find solutions to our moral crisis? The key issue seems to be whether we will be wise or clever enough to discern the proper solution in the midst of our moral crisis. If we do, then we will receive the 'praise' of our master.

At this point we might pause to observe some remarkable similarities with the previous parable of the Prodigal Son:

- both son and manager rely upon the mercy of their father/master
- both son and manager betray a trust
- neither son or manager offer any excuse for their misdemeanours
- both son and manager experience the remarkable mercy of their father/master.

Jesus states three important lessons which arise from this parable. First there is the fact that the master does praise the manager for his clever action. This suggests that the manager is held to account for his action, but the master, evaluating the entire situation, in mercy forgives him. Secondly, the shrewdness of the steward is held up as a lesson for Jesus' disciples (vs. 8b). Jesus seems to be encouraging his disciples to prepare themselves for the day of reckoning by using all of the resources God gives, even money, to ensure a proper relationship with God. Finally, there is the grace of the tenants (vs.9). The manager does gain friends among his master's renters. This is the equivalent to a welcome "into eternal dwellings", i.e. eternal life. Thus a prudent life of discipleship will result in eternal blessing and joy. In sum, because the disciple of Jesus knows that judgment day is coming, he will use every means possible, including the stewardship of personal wealth, to serve God and thus prepare for that time of evaluation, so that we will receive God's praise, rather than God's curse.

Jesus' statements in Luke 16:13 give us clear insight into his intended meaning. Our personal wealth can either be a tool for divine service, or an idol leading us in rebellion against God. In terms of the parable the clever manager wisely employed wealth to benefit others, gain the praise of his master, and thus ensure himself of a 'home'. People can act like that prodigal son and use their capital for foolish, greedy, and fleeting purposes. Such actions

lead us into desperate straits, i.e. famished and herding pigs, or, as the clever manager knows, impoverished and digging in the fields or begging in the streets. And as the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, which follows, demonstrates, if we embrace wealth as our god, this results in eternal devastation. Have regard for your eternal future, Jesus urges. We buy insurance to protect ourselves against disaster; we set up registered retirement saving plans to ensure secure senior years; and we watch our diets to insure we have proper food for a healthy, physical body. But Jesus warns us that if these things constitute the sum total of our life, then we have missed the most important element, namely our relationship with God and our life beyond this world. Money does not last and ultimately will fail. The disciples of Jesus are people who exercise even greater diligence in regards to their heavenly future than the 'people of this world' expend to protect their earthly well-being.

We must be careful here to set the message of this parable within the larger context of Jesus' teaching. He is talking about the life of discipleship, presuming that a person has already entered into a relationship with God. The actions he encourages are not the basis of this relationship, but the result of this relationship. What would some of these principles be?

1. Jesus stresses honesty and trustworthiness as key values no matter what your responsibilities or opportunities might be (vs. 10-11).
2. God entrusts us with abilities and resources. These belong to Him but He lends them to us for our benefit. If we do not use these endowments well now and for the right purposes, what makes us think that God will bless us with additional or greater endowments in the future (vs. 12)?
3. Divided loyalties are a formula for disaster. God is jealous of our loyalty and will not tolerate idolatry. We must choose to serve God or we end up serving someone or something else and this leads to personal disaster (vs. 13).
4. We must discern those things and actions which God values and determine to value those things ourselves. Otherwise we will discover that we have valued what God in fact detests (vs. 15).
5. Like the steward we need to be wise with respect to our future and do all in our power now to insure "our welcome into eternal dwellings."

Frequently Jesus affirms that our actions reveal the intent and loyalty of our lives. While the fundamental decisions are matters of a changed heart, i.e. entire person, such changes must inevitably find expression in action. As James says later, our faith will become clear in our works. If we have no works, then our faith is non-existent. The problem with the Pharisees was their claim to worship God, but actions, i.e. love for money, which betrayed such assertions as being false. As Jesus says in vs. 15, "God knows your hearts" even though human beings might be fooled.

Let us determine to bend every effort to serve God and enjoy His trust in this life and in the eternal life that in mercy and grace He has provided so generously.

Questions to Stimulate Discussion

1. Why do you think Jesus chose such a character as the shrewd manager whose behaviour is criminal? What does this tell us about the importance of distinguishing Jesus' story from his intended interpretation?
2. Do you think the manager's conduct was common in Palestine? Would listeners identify with the character and his response? Why?
3. Luke clusters in his Gospel at this point (15:1- 16:15) a long series of parables. What is Luke's comment at the end of this series (16:15)? Does this provide us with an clue as to Jesus' intent in speaking this parable and his intended audience?
4. What are the three scenes that structure this parable? As the manager takes his decision in scene two, what characteristic of the owner is he counting on?
5. What do you think Jesus' main point is in this parable? Why?
6. Many see considerable comparison with the parable of "The Prodigal Son". What might some of these similarities be?
7. What are the three lessons that Jesus derives from this parable (vs. 8-9)?
8. How do Jesus' comments in 16:13 provide us with further insight into the significance of this parable?
9. What do you think Jesus is saying about the way his followers use their personal wealth? What other discipleship principles does Jesus express through this parable?

Personal Study Options

Jesus had a lot to say to his followers about the issue of wealth. Review the parables you have studied up to this point. What principles about our wealth or possessions does Jesus provide through his parables? How do these principles continue to guide his followers today?

Parables of Jesus – Summary and Conclusion

The power of Jesus' parables and the significant teaching they contain can scarcely be overestimated. Consistently Jesus identifies key, life issues and through these stories and their shocking twists and turns gives us his wise, life-giving responses. Even with serious study, however, we still sense that much of Jesus' message escapes our grasp and so we feel compelled to return to each parable and read it afresh. We know there is more there for us to learn and understand. Just like those first disciples we keep coming to Jesus and begging him to explain to us the parables. Graciously, through his Spirit, he continues to help us.

But what have we learned through our recent consideration of some of Jesus' parables? Let's review and highlight some of these things, consolidating our understanding.

1. *Each story has its own unique twist.* When Jesus tells a parable, we know to look for the unusual, the extraordinary, even the shocking element. Often this will point us to the key idea or theme which Jesus intends his parable to convey. For example, in the story of the shrewd manager it is the surprising commendation of the steward by the master which catches us off guard. But in the parable of the Tenant Farmers (Mark 12), perhaps it is the decision of the farmers to kill the heir that takes us aback. When we discover the landowner paying his day labourers the same amount despite the difference in the amount of time they have worked, we are offended at this apparent injustice. Jesus takes these rather normal life events and incidents and by adding these subtle, unexpected shifts in plot, he manages to stir our attention.
2. *Each story has a context in the Gospel accounts.* We have sought to pay close attention to the Gospel context of each parable. In this process our understanding of the parable has received some specific direction. Often the context provides important clues to the key issues that Jesus addresses through the parables. The parable of the Tenant Farmers in Mark 12, for instance, comes as the conflict between Jesus and the religious rulers is reaching its climax. As a strong warning of impending judgment and a prophetic word regarding God's intentions, it prepares us for the final actions of Jesus' mission, including the cross, resurrection, and Great Commission. Or we might consider how the parable of the four soils (Mark 4) explains why Jesus' teachings and miracles are receiving such diverse reactions from the crowds, disciples, religious rulers, and his family.
3. *Each story tells us something significant about Jesus' mission.* It is true that within the parables of Jesus we discover the essence of his mission. Why has he come? Who is he? What is the significance of his presence for us? How are we to respond to his presence? The parables are pre-eminently focused upon Jesus Christ and his work. Within them we discern his own perception of his person, role, and significance. He is the sower

- spreading the seed (word), the beloved son killed by the tenant farmers, and the bridegroom whose coming initiates the marriage feast. His actions and motives reflect those of God Himself as he welcomes the sinner, forgives the repentant, exercises judgment, and rewards those who serve faithfully. Through his actions the Kingdom reign of God gains visibility and we see the mustard seed grow, the pearl of great price discovered, the new wine offered. And often Jesus challenges the current sense of piety by revealing hypocrisy in the story of the Good Samaritan, religious blindness in the parable of the prodigal son, and distorted patterns of forgiveness through the comparison with the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18).
4. *Each story challenges us in fundamental ways.* The Greeks enjoyed Aesop's fables. The rabbis had their illustrations as they sought to explain God's law. But neither of these literary media comes close to achieving the continuing impact of Jesus' parables. It is as if we hear Jesus' voice distinctly addressing us today. These stories are for us, but they unnerve us. The expectations of his disciples that Jesus presents in the parable of the Unforgiving Servant leave us shaking our heads with wonder. How is it possible for us to forgive someone again and again and again? Or, in what way can we break through our prejudice and self-interest to display the compassion that the Samaritan showed to that vulnerable, Jewish man, bleeding to death by the side of the road? What kind of soil is our life as we hear the word of God – hard, rocky, parched or fertile? Do we have the wisdom to use our resources appropriately for God's service? Are we truly being faithful servants or does selfishness and personal greed dominate our motives? Each parable raises these hard questions and requires us to search our hearts deeply to discern the truth. We are left humbled, repentant, and dependent upon God's mercy, grace and power.

I am sure we might add other elements, but this will have to suffice. We have skimmed the surface, but greater mystery beckons us to continue our reflections.

As we conclude, let us reflect upon the last parable that Jesus told in the Gospel of Matthew, the story of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31-46). Throughout Matthew 24-25 Jesus has shared prophetically what will happen in the future to Jerusalem and how his disciples best can prepare for his return. As he draws his discourse to a conclusion, he focuses his disciples' attention upon that time when "the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him." Despite all of the humiliating suffering Jesus will soon experience, he will return "in his glory and all the angels with him." Jesus affirms his power, his position, and his divine reputation, all of which are somewhat hidden in the earthly role of his first coming. When he returns the second time, however, nothing will be hidden. All will see and acknowledge his authority and position and his deity will appear clearly. His true position in heaven – on his throne in heavenly glory – will appear transparently to all upon the earth. This is a scene of victory, judgment, and

kingly rule. His sovereignty over the nations requires them all to be "gathered before him" to acknowledge his kingship, to serve him as he wishes, and to give account of their work on his behalf. It is time to discern true loyalties.

At this point in his teaching Jesus gives the comparison of the shepherd who separates his flock of sheep and goats into their respective groups. In Palestine shepherds commonly herded sheep and goats together. However, at the end of the day it was important to separate them because sheep can tolerate the cold more ably than goats. It is also possible that the image is more related to the commercial side, as the shepherd separates the more valuable sheep from the less valued goats. The shepherd is very much in control of the entire operation. In Jewish perspective the right hand position reflects honour, blessing, favour and potential power. The left hand symbolizes the opposite. In the Old Testament, as in the teaching of Jesus, sheep often metaphorically represent God's people.

In verse 34 Jesus moves away from this comparison and begins to apply explain the parable's meaning. From this point to the end of the chapter we hear nothing more about sheep or goats. Rather, we return to the initial image of the king who comes and requires his subjects to render account. The entire world is gathered before him and the process of distinguishing those who are loyal to him from those who are not begins. The king in antiquity often is compared to a shepherd, giving protection, nourishment, and leadership to his people, the sheep. Jesus uses this analogy of shepherding to focus our attention upon the reality of this assessing process.

The primary quality that distinguishes the righteous (i.e. sheep) from the unrighteous (i.e. goats) is the expression of love and loyalty to the king through generous, compassionate assistance provided to the king's representatives. It is how we treat Jesus in life that marks our eternal disposition. Guilt arises from a failure to do the right things. The sense of surprise that both groups display indicates that the righteous are not responding favourably to "the least of the brethren" just because they think that such acts will generate greater merit or reward from God. Rather, it is their 'natural' response to their king that arises from a changed heart. Similarly, those who mistreat or ignore "the least of the brethren" do not do this because they think it will bring upon them greater retribution. Rather, it is their 'natural' response as well.

There exists no middle ground between the sheep and the goats. And this surely is what the parables of Jesus intend us to learn well. A decision must be made. Our eternal destiny and present relationship with God depend entirely upon this. As we consider the coming of Jesus into our world, let us reflect carefully upon the eternal implications of his advent 2000 years ago in Bethlehem.

Questions to Stimulate Discussion

1. What have been some of the principles of parable interpretation you have discovered during this series of Bible Studies? What others would you add?
2. How has the principle of a parable's Gospel context helped you understand the primary point Jesus wanted to convey through a particular parable?
3. The parable of "The Sheep and the Goats" is one of Jesus' most powerful parables. What does Jesus affirm about himself as Son of Man in this parable?
4. How does the image of the Shepherd change after vs. 34 of Matthew 25? What does this tell us about Jesus' role in the Kingdom of God? How does he function in this role?
5. What is the primary quality that distinguishes the sheep from the goats in this parable? What does this suggest about the primary responsibility we have as followers of Jesus today? How do we live this out in practical terms?
6. Is there any middle ground between the sheep and the goats? Why not?
7. How do parables operate for us today as windows into Jesus' worldview?
8. What have you learned about discipleship from this study of Jesus' parables?

Personal Study Options

Try to get hold of one of the recommended books on parables. If none of these are available, perhaps your pastor has one that he might lend you. Read it through carefully. Evaluate what you have learned through these Bible Studies in the light of that book. What additional principles of interpretation are suggested?

Recommended Sources for Additional Readings

Bailey, Kenneth. *Poet and Peasant. A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976. 238 pages.

The author seeks to place the parables of Luke in the lifestyle context of the middle east peasant, thus seeking to illuminate the social context of these stories.

Blomberg, Craig. *Interpreting the Parables*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1990. 334 pages.

An excellent introduction to issues of parable interpretation, as well as a very thorough review of many of Jesus' parables.

Boucher, Madeleine. *The Mysterious Parable. A Literary Study*. Washington, D.C., Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1977. 101 pages.

A very thorough consideration is given to the literary form and function of the parables of Jesus. She helps the reader understand the relationship between parables and allegory.

_____. *The Parables. New Testament Message 7*. Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1986. 168 pages.

The author first considers matters of parable interpretation and then offers commentary on many of Jesus' parables.

Kistemaker, Simon. *The Parables of Jesus*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998. 301 pages. (Reprint of the Bake Book House publication of 1980).

After a short introduction to the parables in general, the author offers commentary on each of Jesus' parables.