

# The Parables of Our Lord



Volume  
Two

Louis Rushmore

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# The Parables of Our Lord Volume 2

By Louis Rushmore



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# Foreword

The parables of Jesus have always had a special place in the hearts of serious Bible students. One of the great works on our Lord's parables is the old, but yet invaluable, volume by Richard C. Trench, *Notes On The Parables Of Our Lord*. It, as this second volume, *The Parables of Our Lord*, is worthy of our study.

While the literature on the parables is voluminous, occurring in an unending number of books, pamphlets and articles, this volume is written for Bible class study. The volume contains thirteen chapters studying a parable per chapter. They are studies and expositions that are practical. Each study includes a good introduction followed by a thorough discussion on the parable's background, context and lesson. At the close of each chapter there is a series of discussion questions and a section of questions requiring the student to complete the blanks. Many of the studies contain a crossword puzzle relating to that parable. Extensive endnotes complete the study and give the more serious student information for additional study.

It is said that about one-third of the teaching of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels is in parabolic form. The disciples asked Jesus: "Why speakest thou unto them in parables" (Matthew 13:10). Jesus replied that the parabolic method was used to reveal truth to some and to conceal truth from others (Matthew 13:11-17).

The parables of Jesus set forth in rich terms eternal and heavenly truths by means of simple everyday lessons that appeal to all who read and study them. They summarize what Jesus thought, taught and how He expected man to live in His kingdom and to prepare for the eternal kingdom, heaven itself.

We appreciate the opportunity to write this Foreword. We give our recommendation to this great work.

~ W. Terry Varner

# Publisher's Statement

Louis and Bonnie Rushmore are God's special answer to our prayers. When J.C.'s cancer recurred in 2005, and his health continued to deteriorate with the passing months, we recognized anew our total dependence on God to supply the people who were needed to carry on the work that had been developing since 1960. Beginning as missionaries in Karachi, Pakistan in 1962, our overseas involvement had fostered the printing of books as follow-up tools for radio and TV programs. Many of the books were printed in India, Sri Lanka, Singapore and the Philippines, but because of the need for literature in other places J.C. began printing materials in the States as well. That has grown to be a service for WBS, jail ministries, local evangelism and foreign evangelism, in addition to becoming the publisher of the accounts of the lives and work of missionaries in many parts of the world.

Good things – eternal things – were being done through these efforts, and we didn't want them to end with J.C.'s death. In the fall of 2007, God brought the Louis Rushmores to be a part of our World Evangelism team in Winona. With Louis' background in preaching, teaching for ten years in a school of preaching, writing and publishing books and editing his online magazine, *Gospel Gazette Online*, he and Bonnie were ideal for the work that needed to be done. We continue to be thankful for their decision to move to Winona and to join hands with us to share the printed word with people who are hungry for the message.

Louis brought with him a small printer and a number of books that he had written and printed in the past. *Parables, Volumes 1 and 2* are two of those books. We are happy to make them available for use in this format, and we look forward to enabling many souls to learn the depths of our Lord's teachings more perfectly through these publications. To that end, we commend this volume to you.

Betty (Mrs. J.C.) Choate  
Winona, MS 38967  
February 6, 2009

# Chapter 1: The Unmerciful Servant

(Matthew 18:21-35)

## INTRODUCTION

Prefatory events to our Lord's parable of the *Unmerciful Servant* include: (1) rivalry among the apostles for prominence "in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:1), (2) Jesus Christ's illustration of "a little child" to teach humility (Matt. 18:2-5), (3) Christ's instruction to avoid offenses (Matt. 18:6-14), (4) Jesus' teaching how to resolve interpersonal problems among the children of God (Matt. 18:15-17), (5) the essentially of unity among the apostles (Matt. 18:18-20), and (6) Peter's question about forgiveness (Matt. 18:21-22).

The Gospel of Mark records that on the way to Capernaum our Lord's disciples argued "among themselves who should be the greatest" (Mark 9:33-37). Luke's account verifies that this discord occurred (Luke 9:46-48). On a later occasion, James and John, with their mother, sought Jesus to grant them preeminence among the apostles. This self-serving maneuver produced animosity in the other ten apostles toward James and John (Matt. 20:20-28).

Strife and offenses resulted from these petty rivalries. The apostles were offended or had **hard feelings** toward each other. Jesus countered this potentially disastrous unrest among his apostles with two lessons: (1) humility to offset the insipid jealousies, and (2) repentance and forgiveness to repair their fellowship with each other — and with the Godhead.

Satisfactory resolution of foreboding breaches following this incident was critical to the overall training of the apostles. During his ministry, Jesus prepared them for the execution of the Great Commission and guidance of the infant church, beginning in Acts Two. Failure at this juncture would have severely undermined God's plan to establish the kingdom of prophecy. Similarly, unchecked rivalries or jealousies and ill-will among members greatly hamper any congregation in which those sins are present.

Jesus picked up a child as a living illustration of humility (Mark 9:36).

"And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:2-4).

Jesus then taught that sinful offenses would occur, despite best efforts to avoid them (Matt. 18:6-14).

These trespasses or sins were to be resolved privately and discreetly, if possible. "Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother" (Matt. 18:15). If

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unable to resolve sinful differences this way, with as little escalation as possible, additional persons ought to lend themselves to terminating alienation among brethren. “But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established” (Matt. 18:16). Finally, prior attempts failing to disarm estrangement between brethren, the local congregation is obliged to intervene to restore civility and fellowship. “And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican” (Matt. 18:17).

The very office of responsibility for which Jesus prepared his apostles was endangered by their disaffection for each other. Ordinarily, we turn to Matthew 18:18-20 as evidence of apostolic authority. Division was counterproductive to their mission as apostles and the authority with which they were to exercise themselves as apostles (Matt. 18:20).

Peter, though accommodating by then contemporary custom, could not envision being obligated to forgive repeat offenders, irrespective of the number of times one might sins against him. “Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?” (Matt. 18:21). One commentator observes:

This was being generous. Rabbis advised forgiving a brother only three times.<sup>1</sup>

With the apostle Peter, it was *three strikes and you're out!* Of course,

. . . Peter . . . assumed that his brother would sin against him, not he against his brother. . . . He wanted to be able to *measure* forgiveness. This meant he was thinking of setting a limit: “This far and no further!” The Lord exposed that fallacy when He said, “Not seven times, but seventy times seven!” By the time you have forgiven somebody that many times, you are in the habit of forgiving and will not need to obey rules on set limits.<sup>2</sup>

Peter wanted mercy for himself but exacted justice without mercy on others.<sup>3</sup> “Peter indeed was willing to forgive, but his mistake was that he measured himself by a human rather than a divine standard.”<sup>4</sup>

“Forgiveness must never be refused when sought with repentance.”<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, often brethren superficially purport to forgive while demonstrating by their actions their reluctance to proffer forgiveness on their fellows. Only rarely have I observed a Christian brazenly and openly refuse to forgive professed penitents.

Repentance **must** precede forgiveness, though a Christian should always be willing to forgive penitent offenders.

“Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him” (Luke 17:3-4).

To refuse forgiveness to a fellow Christian professing repentance would require the omniscience of God.

## Chapter One: The Unmerciful Servant

The pages of inspiration amply attest to the child of God to be ready always to forgive. “Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy” (Matt. 5:7).

“For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt. 6:14-15).

“For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again” (Matt. 7:2). “Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven” (Luke 6:37). “And forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil” (Luke 11:4). “And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you” (Eph. 4:32). “Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye” (Col. 3:13).

Whereas Peter was willing to forgive someone seven times, Jesus posed a much larger number, 70 times seven or 490 times (Matt. 18:22). Jesus used this formula figuratively to teach that one should **always** be willing to forgive. The word “Therefore,” with which the parable of the *Unmerciful Servant* begins, makes a direct relationship between that parable and the foregoing verses that we just surveyed.

### THE PARABLE

“Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven. Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants. And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents. But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt. But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellowservants, which owed him an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest. And his fellowservant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt. So when his



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fellobservants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done. Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow-servant, even as I had pity on thee? And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him. So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses” (Matt. 18:21-35).

According to the commentator, R.C. Trench, the *Unmerciful Servant* is the first parable where God is represented as being a king.<sup>6</sup> (The parable derives its name from observation of the conduct by the first servant. The king called him the “wicked servant.”) Another writer says of the parable, “This is the only parable in the Bible that demonstrates the magnitude of God’s forgiveness.”<sup>7</sup> Herbert Lockyer writes that the parable of the *Unmerciful Servant* allows us to ‘glimpse the mercy and compassion of the divine heart.’<sup>8</sup>

From verse 23, we note that this is another kingdom parable. God is represented here as a king. The accounting or evaluation, according to Wayne Jackson, is the Gospel call.<sup>9</sup> The servants represent sinners. Besides the initial examination by the Gospel through which one goes when first acquainted with it, there will also be a **final examination**. “So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God” (Rom. 14:12). The Word of Christ will be the means by which examination is made then, too (John 12:48). Happily, no one has to fail the final examination that precedes the assignment of an eternal abode. Anyone can take a pre-test and thereafter make any needed adjustments. “Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?” (2 Cor. 13:5).

In verse 24, a servant owed the king an enormous debt, which in this parable represents sin. Several factors obscure precisely the equivalent amount to contemporary times that this servant owed. First, our economy is highly inflated over first-century economics in Palestine. Second, the value of a talent varied depending on whether the Roman or Jewish talent is considered. Third, a talent of gold varied greatly in value from a talent of silver. Modern estimates tally the 10,000 talents ranging from about \$3,000,000 to \$150,000,000.<sup>10</sup> In any event, the money owed was an insurmountable debt that was beyond the servant’s ability to make restitution.

Two commentators attempt to provide a frame of reference regarding the enormity of this debt with the following illustrations.

To understand the buying power of a talent, consider that one talent would purchase a slave. The total annual tax bill for Palestine was about 800 talents, and this man owed 10,000 talents! One talent would be equal to 20 year’s wages for the average man.<sup>11</sup>

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If the Jewish silver talent is under consideration, the servant's debt was an estimated \$10,000,000. References to both gold and silver talents were common throughout Jewish history (Exod. 28:24; 1 Kings 10:10; 1 Chron. 29:4-7).

In Palestine a laboring man's daily wages were one shilling (approximately 17 cents). It would have taken 200,000 years to pay off that debt! This illustrates man's complete inability to pay off his sin-debt to Jehovah. Man stands bankrupt before God.<sup>12</sup>

The servant's debt was far beyond his ability to repay. Both Roman and Jewish law allowed that a debtor could be sold for his debts. For instance, a thief who when caught was unable to make restitution was sold (Exod. 22:3). Debts extended to the family of the debtor, for which family members could be sold (2 Kings 4:1).

"Because of our sins, we are under an un-payable debt to God."<sup>13</sup> Selling the servant and his family represents alienation from God because of sin.

The servant prostrated himself before the king and pleaded for mercy. Further, the servant anxiously pledged to the king that he would repay the astronomical debts over time. "A man in such terror and anguish will promise impossible things."<sup>14</sup> "The servant's promise to pay all reveals of the vastness of the debt owed . . ."<sup>15</sup>

The servant evidently persuaded the king with much heartfelt emotion. Consequently, the king released the servant from his debt. The liquidation of the debt was wholly due to the compassion of the king in response to an impassioned plea. Justice demanded repayment. Mercy, though, here was the annulment of the debt. "'Moved with compassion' is a strong expression suggesting being inwardly pained at suffering with a desire to relieve."<sup>16</sup> Our heavenly Father is moved with this same compassion for all mankind (2 Pet. 3:9).

Verses 28 and 29 describe a similar event following the servant's release from his oppressive debt. This time, though, this first servant required a fellow servant to pay his debt to him immediately. He sought and obtained mercy for himself, but he demanded justice without mercy of his peer. This parable, then, pertains to man's forgiveness of his fellow man.

The two sums of money owed in the parable are deliberate extremes. The servant owed his fellow servant a hundred denarii. The denarius was a Roman coin worth about twenty cents, which made this total debt about twenty dollars.<sup>17</sup>

The second servant owed about four months' wages.<sup>18</sup> The Greek and Roman custom regarding delinquent debtors was to take the debtor by the throat to court for trial.<sup>19</sup> "The worst offenses committed against men are nothing compared to the offenses all have committed against God."<sup>20</sup> Therefore, we ought to forgive one another because God has forgiven us.

However, the first servant was deaf to the identical pleas for mercy he himself made earlier. Instead he cast his fellow servant into prison.

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The reason for imprisonment and cruel treatment was to force the debtor to sell what ever property he might secretly own, or to have the debtor's relatives pay his debt. The creditor would demand slave-labor of the debtor's family so that the debt might be worked off.<sup>21</sup>

Verse 31 depicts the sense of wrong noted by still other servants regarding the unmerciful servant. "An unforgiving disposition arouses indignation in others."<sup>22</sup> Consequently, the misdeeds of the unmerciful were reported to the king. Appalled at the ingratitude, the king reversed his passions toward the unmerciful servant. The "tormentors" to whom the wicked servant was delivered represent eternal hell. The parable here teaches "God will punish those who are unforgiving."<sup>23</sup> Earlier the parable represented the compassion of God. The severity of God is evident also from the parable.

Some commentators imagine they have found in this passage biblical evidence for the Roman Catholic doctrine of "purgatory." It is to the phrase "till he should pay all that was due unto him" in verse 34 appeal is made.

The Romish theologians find an argument for purgatory in the words, **till he should pay all that was due**, as also in Matt. v. 26. But it seems plainly a proverbial expression; for since man could never acquit the slightest portion of the debt which he owes to God, the putting of such a condition was the strongest possible way of expressing the eternal duration of this punishment.<sup>24</sup>

Similar emphasis is used in the crude and picturesque expression, "when hell freezes over" or "when pigs fly."

### CONCLUSION

The moral of the parable is plainly expressed in verse 35. "So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses" (Matt. 18:35). The forgiveness by God of which children of God are recipients **must be** demonstrated by them toward their fellows.

The immensity of the debt does not hinder God's full and free pardon (Isa. 1:18; 55:7). God will save the chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). No one is beyond forgiveness; it makes little difference as to how many, how big, and how long one's sins have reached.<sup>25</sup>

God, then, teaches us how to forgive. Finally,

. . . this parable is striking and impressive because of its acute contrasts. First, there is the contrast of Peter's number and the Lord's. Peter was willing to forgive several times, but the Lord said to forgive to infinity. Second, there is the contrast of the two debts. One was a trifling sum, the other was unpayable.<sup>26</sup>

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### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Describe, from the perspective of the apostles, the kingdom in which through their rivalries they sought prominence.
2. Explain the impact that dissension among brothers and sisters in Christ has on interpersonal fellowship and fellowship with God.
3. Describe the potentially adverse affect of disharmony of the apostles on the unfolding plan of God for the establishment of the kingdom (church).
4. Describe the condition of a congregation in which rivalries and jealousy continue unchecked.
5. Fully explain the procedure given by Jesus for the resolution of interpersonal problems among Christians. To what type of circumstances does this procedure apply, and to what type of circumstances does this procedure **not apply**?
6. Contrast situations in which it is biblically impossible to extend forgiveness with the Christian obligation to practice forgiveness.
7. List sins for which Christians usually have difficulty actually extending forgiveness despite penitence of the sinner and in spite of our professed willingness to forgive.
8. Why do you suppose that the parable of the *Unmerciful Servant* and instruction immediately preceding the parable are so lengthy compared to other topics about which Jesus taught?
9. How do you suppose that the unmerciful servant amassed such an enormous debt?
10. How can we avoid a final examination for which we are unprepared and eternally disappointed?
11. Explain the affect of one's sins on other souls, especially his family.
12. Describe the contrasting attributes of compassion and severity as they apply to God.
13. Contrast the principles of justice and mercy. How can a just God also be merciful?
14. Contrast the sins committed against us with the sins committed against God.
15. Contrast the Catholic doctrine of purgatory with the biblical portrayal of the after-death disposition of souls.

### MORE QUESTIONS

1. List six events that immediately preceded the parable of the *Unmerciful Servant*.
2. About what were the apostles arguing preceding the presentation of this parable.
3. To what city were the apostles and Jesus traveling when the apostles argued among themselves?
4. What two lesson topics did Jesus address to the apostles before presenting the parable?
5. What affect do rivalries or jealousies and ill-will have on congregations? (a) Christians ultimately are edified because controversy causes greater Bible study. (b) Such congregations are severely hampered in edification, spiritual growth and numerical growth. (c) There is no significant affect on these congregations.
6. To what living illustration did Jesus appeal to teach humility?

## Chapter One: The Unmerciful Servant

7. Despite best efforts to avoid, what are unavoidable?
8. Matthew 18:15-17 applies to the resolution of sins among whom? (a) private sins between individuals, (b) public sins, (c) both private and public sins.
9. Ordinarily, we turn to Matthew 18:18-20 for evidence of what?
10. Peter generously proposed to forgive persons how many times?
11. What must precede forgiveness?
12. What divine quality would one need to possess to deny forgiveness to professed penitent offenders?
13. List seven biblical references regarding forgiveness.
14. What is the significance of Jesus' reference to "seventy times seven"?
15. From what does the parable of the *Unmerciful Servant* derive its name?
16. To what do the following references in the parable refer: the king, the accounting, the servants, debt, discharge of the debt, the lesser debt, selling the servant and his family, tormentors?
17. About how much were each of the two debts worth?
18. Why is it difficult to know precisely the worth of the larger debt?
19. Under what circumstances did Judaism permit persons to be sold into slavery?
20. Why would someone pledge to pay a debt that is humanly impossible to repay?
21. Define "compassion."
22. Why should Christians extend forgiveness to others?
23. What was the purpose of imprisoning and mistreating debtors?
24. To what does the phrase "till he should pay all that was due" refer?
25. Whose sins are too grievous for God to forgive?

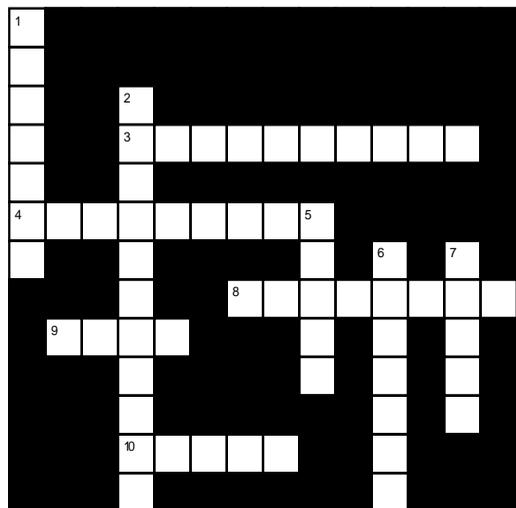
### The Unmerciful Servant

#### Across

3. Precedes forgiveness.
4. Jesus' disciples argued on the way to this city.
8. Forgive and ye shall be \_\_\_\_\_.
9. First parable that portrays God this way.
10. Jesus used this living example of humility.

#### Down

1. What the unmerciful servant demanded of his servant.
2. James and John sought this among the apostles.
5. What the unmerciful servant wanted for himself.
6. This type of parable.
7. Extent of Peter's forgiveness.



### ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *Windows on the Parables*, Wheaton, Scripture Press, 123.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 123-124.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 128-129.

<sup>4</sup> Neil R. Lightfoot, *The Parables of Jesus, Vol. 1*, Abilene, ACU Press, 47.

<sup>5</sup> James Davis, "The Unmerciful Servant," *The Parables of Our Savior*, Indianapolis, Garfield Road church of Christ, 81.

<sup>6</sup> R.C. Trench, *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord*, Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 55.

<sup>7</sup> Davis, 78.

<sup>8</sup> Herbert Lockyer, *All the Parables of the Bible*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan Publishing House, 219.

<sup>9</sup> Wayne Jackson, *The Parables in Profile*, Stockton, CA, Wayne Jackson, 49.

<sup>10</sup> Lockyer, 218.

<sup>11</sup> Wiersbe, 125.

<sup>12</sup> Jackson, 49.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>14</sup> Davis, 77.

<sup>15</sup> Jackson, 49.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Lightfoot, 50.

<sup>18</sup> Wiersbe, 125.

<sup>19</sup> Lightfoot, 48.

<sup>20</sup> Davis, 81.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>22</sup> Jackson, 50.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Trench, 59.

<sup>25</sup> Davis, 80.

<sup>26</sup> Lightfoot, 51.

# Chapter 2: The Good Samaritan

(Luke 10:25-37)

## INTRODUCTION

The parable of *The Good Samaritan* is one of several parables that are recorded exclusively by Luke. Sequentially in Luke's account of our Lord's earthly ministry, the verbal exchange between Jesus and one in his audience, during which this parable was recited, occurred following the return of the 70. During his Perea ministry, Jesus had sent 70 disciples ahead of him into the cities that he would soon visit (Luke 10:1). These disciples were charged to heal the sick and proclaim that the kingdom was close to coming (Luke 10:9). (Formerly, during our Lord's ministry in Galilee, he commissioned the twelve and charged them with the same mission, Matt. 10:1-6; Mark 6:7-13.)

The *coming kingdom* was the object of prophecy (Isa. 2; Dan. 2; Joel 2; Acts 2) and the longing of the Jews. Nevertheless, the Jews expected and wanted a physical kingdom (John 6:14-15), whereas Jesus Christ came to establish a spiritual kingdom (John 18:36-37). Even at the late date of the moments preceding his Ascension, our Lord's apostles still imagined that Jesus was about to establish a physical kingdom. "When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6).

Upon the return of the 70, and after they exclaimed that "even the devils are subject unto us through thy name" (Luke 10:17), Jesus responded, "rather rejoice, because your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:20). Perhaps in the presence of a larger audience, our Lord still turned to his disciples and spoke to them privately (Luke 10:23). Immediately thereafter in Luke's account a lawyer of the Law of Moses posed a question to Jesus (Luke 10:25). Was there time and distance between Jesus' reception of the returning 70 and the lawyer's question, or was the lawyer in the larger audience that day? Is it possible that the lawyer was one of the 70 or does the new paragraph in which his question appears indicate, though not specified in the text, that the interchange between the lawyer and Jesus occurred on another occasion, perhaps even on another day?

Misgivings about the new kingdom and its doctrine persisted among the disciples of Christ well after the establishment of the kingdom (church). With some reluctance, the apostle Peter surrendered his prejudice toward non-Jews to proclaim the Gospel to them (Acts 10-11). Peter, though, suffered a relapse to his old mentality regarding Gentiles, for which the apostle Paul publicly rebuked him (Gal. 2:11-14). Judaizing teachers within the church were the source of much agitation, for which the apostles and elders in Jerusalem publicly and in writing countered such erroneous teaching (Acts 15).

Whether the lawyer on this occasion was a disciple of Christ (though somewhat misguided) or what we might call a *heckler* is difficult to say. The enemies of Jesus frequently badgered our Lord from amidst a crowd of the curious and truth-seekers (Matt.

## Chapter 3: The Good Samaritan

22:15) as they also did to John the Baptist (Matt. 3:7). In any case, the lawyer's question provides the platform for Jesus' presentation of the parable of *The Good Samaritan*.

### THE PARABLE

“And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25).

This is the most important question that anyone could ask! This question has been asked by various persons under various circumstances that are recorded upon the pages of inspiration. This question has also been asked for various reasons — not always to obtain information. The lawyer in the context before us may have been insincere, only hoping to somehow belittle our Lord. The lawyer's motive appears to have been disingenuous.



The 3,000 souls who obeyed the Gospel message in Acts 2 were not seeking the Gospel or the church when the Spirit-filled apostles began preaching in Jerusalem that day. However, they were moved by the message to mouth, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). Saul of Tarsus (better known to us as the apostle Paul) was not seeking Gospel truth when Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus (Acts 9; 22; 26). Yet, he, too, asked the question in these words, “Lord, what wilt thou have me to

do?” (Acts 9:6). The 3,000 and Paul became Christians once they received the answer to this all-important question. The *rich young ruler* asked, “Good Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 18:18), but went away sorrowfully. The lawyer to whom Jesus recited the parable of *The Good Samaritan* seems to have resisted the divine answer to his question, too.

The lawyer's question corresponds to the spiritual assessment and encouragement that Jesus directed toward the returning 70: “rejoice, because your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:20). It is possible that with an air of sarcasm the lawyer rebutted the statement of Jesus with his question. Irrespective of the lawyer's reason for asking the question, that question is important because of the corresponding divine answer. At no time was the answer to the question a curt, “Nothing!” It is not the case that mankind is exempted from participation in his own redemption.

When the Jews on Pentecost asked, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37), Peter did not say, “There is nothing to do!” Instead, he said: “. . . Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins . . .” (Acts 2:38). When Saul of Tarsus asked that same question, Jesus did not say, “There is

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nothing for you to do!” Rather, the record reads, “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee **what thou must do**” (Acts 9:6). A disciple named Ananias was sent by Jesus to Saul and proclaimed, “And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (Acts 22:16). The rich young ruler and the lawyer both lived under Judaism and were nevertheless informed that there was something for them to do. Any of the passages above would have been perfect opportunities for the Holy Spirit to announce faith only or grace only or universalism or unconditional election — without the participation of mankind in his own redemption. Instead, redemption is conditional on obedience (Heb. 5:9) or walking in the light (1 John 1:7). We must, in a sense, work out our own salvation (Phil. 2:12). Still, due to human frailty and our sins, we must rely on the grace and mercy of God (Eph. 2:8; Titus 3:5). Grace and mercy are conditional on our obedience despite human shortcomings.

“He said unto him, What is written in the law? how readeest thou?” (Luke 10:26).

Many people in our Lord’s day or even now may not know the answer to the question posed by the lawyer and earnestly desire a reliable answer. This lawyer, though, was not such a person. By his training and life-long pursuit, he was expected to know the biblical answer to the very question he asked. Jesus, therefore, compelled the lawyer to answer his own question, which he did.

The lawyer by profession was an expert in the Jewish law. He was a man who was supposed to know all the answers.<sup>1</sup>

Our Lord in substance says — The question you ask is already answered. “How readeest thou?”<sup>2</sup>

The lawyer not only answered his own question, but he answered it correctly. However, feeling the force of having his question turned back on him, he attempted to avoid the application of the divine truth to himself.

“And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself. And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live. But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbour?” (Luke 10:27-29).

The two-level apportionment of our love, first and foremost to God and secondarily to our fellow man, underlies the whole duty of man. This multi-directional love is addressed in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament.

“And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and

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when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up” (Deut. 6:5-7).

“Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the Lord” (Lev. 19:18).

“Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matt. 22:37-40).

As indicated in Deuteronomy 6, the love that God expected his children to exhibit toward him and toward each other was neither an obscure nor a mysterious revelation. Instruction about love (and every instruction from God) was to be an intricate part of family devotions. Love for God fosters love for one’s fellow man; love for our fellows reinforces one’s love for God.

“If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also” (1 John 4:20-21).

The lawyer’s last statement, “And who is my neighbour?,” led our Lord’s presentation of the parable of *The Good Samaritan*.

It has been said that this parable is the most practical of all the parables. It gets down to the bottom of what Christianity really is. There is no room here for pious platitudes and hair-splitting definitions, no place for Christianity in the abstract or for a religion to be seen of men. With one scene the flashes upon the screen Jesus compels us to see that *Christianity is a way of living*.<sup>3</sup>

“. . . Jesus used his question as an opportunity to teach an important truth, namely, *you cannot separate your relationship with God from your relationship with your fellow man*.”<sup>4</sup>

“And Jesus answering said, A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, And went to him, and bound up his wounds,

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pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee” (Luke 10:30-35).

The “certain man” is anonymous to us, even to the extent that his nationality or ethnic background, his economic, political and social status are not declared. However, for the parable to have the greatest emphasis, it must surely be inferred that the wounded man was Jewish. If he were a Samaritan or a Gentile, given the then contemporary Jewish prejudice toward all non-Jews, the illustration would lose its force. That is, Jews would naturally be thought to avoid a Samaritan or a Gentile, whereas the Samaritan would more nearly come to the aid of an injured fellow Samaritan or a Gentile. “In the time of Christ the bitterness between Jew and Samaritan was so great that Jews traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem would cross over to the east side of the Jordan and come through Perea rather than go through the country of the Samaritans.”<sup>5</sup> The parable presents a scenario in which one would expect the Jewish passerbys to more readily come to the poor man’s rescue than the Samaritan traveler.

The Bible is persistently correct regarding geography, topography and any other science about which the inspired Book speaks and that also lends itself to critical review. (It, then, is reasonable to believe that the Bible is credible also regarding those subjects of which it speaks that are not susceptible to verification by physical evidence.) Jerusalem rests atop a central range of mountains in Canaan at about 2,500 feet above sea level. Jericho, 16 miles east of Jerusalem, is 800 feet below sea level. One literally descends or goes “down” from Jerusalem to Jericho, dropping 3,300 feet.

Some localities in Bible times were especially notorious for the ferocious activity of robbers, especially in rugged areas along highways. One such place may have prompted the missionary John Mark to turn back from his evangelistic endeavor while Paul and Barnabas continued (Acts 13:13; 15:38). The road between Jerusalem and Jericho shared this infamous distinction.

The Jericho road was rugged, robber-infested. Because travelers had been attached so often on this road, it became know as “the bloody way.”<sup>6</sup>

One commentator cites the Jewish historian, Josephus, regarding the robbery common to that route.

Josephus tells us that Herod had dismissed 40 thousand workmen from the Temple, shortly before Christ’s recital of this parable, and that a large part of them became vicious highway robbers, who were aided in their diabolical plunder by the hiding places and sharp turnings of the road.<sup>7</sup>

Whereas the Jews who passed by the unfortunate victim later doubtless professed piety, the robbers had no regard for their fellow human beings. The robbers only regarded the

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wealth and possessions they hoped to procure from hapless commuters. The lives of their targets were not precious.

Deprived of his money, stripped of his clothes, battered and left to die, the fallen stranger was not a specimen of economic, social or political attainment. He simply was a fellow human being desperately in need of a biblical *neighbor*. “We must find our neighbor everywhere and in everyone, and especially in the fellowman in need.”<sup>8</sup>

Coincidentally, the first person to happen on the scene following the vicious assault was a priest.

Since the time of David, the priests had been divided into twenty-four courses or orders (see 1 Chronicles 24:1-19). Each order served in the temple twice a year, a week at a time. Jericho like Jerusalem was a city of priests, so priests and Levites often were seen moving to and from on the desert road.<sup>9</sup>

Apparently, this man was “. . . one of the 12,000 priests living in Jericho at that time, had evidently left God back in the Temple and had neither time nor compassion for his unfortunate fellow Jew.”<sup>10</sup>

The victim and the priest were both traveling the same direction, away from Jerusalem and down to Jericho. The stranger preceded the priest by a matter of minutes. The priest could have as easily been the human casualty lying along the road, the other man finding him in that condition. Though the priest passed by his fallen countryman, doubtless he would have wished for more compassion by anyone discovering him injured along the highway. “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets” (Matt. 7:12).

Evidently, the priest left his piety back at the temple. He did not demonstrate the religion that he honored by his service in the Temple while traveling the Jericho road. Perhaps his attitude was, “I’ve been serving at the temple. I’ve done my part. . . . I’ve been away from home and need to hurry.”<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps the tendency to duplicate the blameworthy conduct of this priest is common to mankind. Several exhortations appear in the New Testament as if to counter this disposition (Matt. 25:31-46; Jam. 2:15-17).

“And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise” (Luke 6:31).

“As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10).

“Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin” (Jam. 4:17).

“But whoso hath this world’s good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?” (1 John 3:17).

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Next to pass by the dying stranger was a Levite. “The Levite was a servant of the Temple and as a minister of religious worship and an interpreter of the Law should have been eager to assist the distressed soul he looked upon, yet left unaided.”<sup>12</sup> We would say, “The priest and the Levite didn’t practice what they preached.”

A Samaritan, however, the third person to discover the wounded and destitute man, stopped to assist him. What did it mean to be a Samaritan and how did the Samaritans differ from the Jews? Assyria conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C., after which it deported 20,000 Jews and brought in 20,000 Gentiles.<sup>13</sup> The remaining Israelites from the northern kingdom and the re-settled Gentiles intermarried — producing the Samaritans. Upon the return of a remnant of Jews to Jerusalem from their captivity in Babylon, Zerubbabel refused to allow the Samaritans to help rebuild the Temple. The Samaritans built a temple on Mt. Gerizim (John 4:4-20) and practiced a corrupted form of Judaism, revering only the Pentateuch. See also these additional New Testament references to Samaritans: Matthew 10:5; Luke 9:52-53; 17:16, 18; John 8:48.

“The Samaritan: [was] sympathetic (he had compassion on a fellow-human, even though a natural enemy) . . .”<sup>14</sup> Compassion results from the inner self being “moved and stirred.”<sup>15</sup> In this illustration, the character least likely to come to the aid of the victim responds with genuine interest in the physical welfare of the stranger. “The Samaritan did not permit either racial or religious barriers to hinder him from helping the Jewish victim.”<sup>16</sup>

The Samaritan puts himself to inconvenience, perhaps to peril, and after dressing the wounds, takes the wounded one along with him, provides lodging for him and even takes care of the sick and friendless man’s future. The piled-up acts of kindness were all clearly done to a poor stranger, without hope of recompense or reward.<sup>17</sup>

“The good Samaritan used his beast, oil and wine.”<sup>18</sup>

*Oil* was widely used by the ancients as an external remedy to assuage the pain of open wounds (Isaiah 1:6). The use of *wine* was also an external remedy for wounds and bruises.<sup>19</sup>

Besides attending to the injured man’s immediate needs, the Samaritan provided for his extended care, too. Two “pence” (denaria) represented two days’ wages (Matt. 20:2), whereas a day’s lodging cost about a twelfth of a denarius. Thereby, the Samaritan provided for three weeks’ recovery.<sup>20</sup> If that were not enough, the good Samaritan obligated himself financially for reimbursement of the innkeeper should even more be expended in the rehabilitation of the Samaritan’s espoused beneficiary.

Jesus, through this parable, caused the lawyer with whom he was conversing to acknowledge truth before he surely understood that it applied to him. This is one of the characteristics of a parable; see 2 Samuel 12:1-13.

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“Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves? And he said, He that showed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise” (Luke 10:36-37).

The adversaries of our Lord often tried to entangle him in his words, but to no avail (Matt. 22:15-22). In each instance, Jesus thwarted the verbal assaults, as one would expect from the divine Son of God (Matt. 22:46; Luke 14:6).

### CONCLUSION

The Jewish lawyer got the message. When Jesus asked him which of the three was neighbor to the victim — the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan — the lawyer gave the correct answer, but he would not use the word “Samaritan”! He said, “He that showed mercy on him.”<sup>21</sup>

The lessons derived from this parable are many and are equally applicable today. For instance,

Without distinction of race or religion that man is our neighbor who has need of us. It is not place but love that makes neighborhood.<sup>22</sup>

He [the lawyer] failed to see that the important question was not, “Who is my neighbor?” but “To whom can I be a neighbor?”<sup>23</sup>

It is practical service that counts in Christ’s kingdom. Christianity is more than going to church and saying prayers. A group of people can do these things for years and be a dead church. Christianity is a way of living.<sup>24</sup>

We learn from the priest and the Levite that, “Religious ritualism cannot be a substitute for compassion for others.”<sup>25</sup> From the Samaritan we learn that, “Real compassion affects conduct.”<sup>26</sup> “In the parable the Samaritan shows that the circle of Christian responsibility is the world.”<sup>27</sup>

Under Judaism, the Jew was obligated to rescue stray or distressed animals, even if an animal belonged to an enemy (Exod. 23:4-5). The priest and the Levite in the parable ought to have rescued any human being left by robbers to die along a desolate road. With whom do you identify — the priest and the Levite or the *good Samaritan*?

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Contrast the understanding of Pilate versus the understanding of the Lord’s disciples regarding the nature of the kingdom.
2. Explain the significance of the various questions posed regarding redemption and the biblical answers, both of which are in the New Testament.
3. Explain the conditional aspect of redemption, mercy and grace.
4. Explain the relationship of love for God and love for our fellow man.

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5. Explain how incidental references in the parable to topography attest to the reliability of the Bible as a divine revelation.
6. What about this parable is especially practical and as applicable today as when it was first uttered?

### MORE QUESTIONS

1. This parable was uttered following the return of whom?
2. What was the mission of the answer to the previous question?
3. The Jews were expecting a \_\_\_\_\_ kingdom, but Jesus came to establish a \_\_\_\_\_ kingdom.
4. What did Jesus say in response to the exclamation, “even the devils are subject unto us through thy name”?
5. Who asked a question Jesus on this occasion just before the parable was uttered?
6. What is the most important question anyone could ask?
7. Who answered the question in the parable?
8. Toward whom must man demonstrate love first?
9. One cannot separate his relationship between \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_?
10. The wounded man on the Jericho road was probably of what ancestry?
11. How high above sea level is Jerusalem?
12. What is the elevation of Jericho and the difference in elevation between Jerusalem and Jericho?
13. How many miles are there between Jerusalem and Jericho?
14. Who turned from a dangerous missionary journey?
15. What nickname described the dangers of the Jericho road?
16. The first person to find the wounded stranger was whom?
17. Who next discovered the wounded stranger?
18. Who actually helped the wounded stranger?
19. Cite six passages that essentially teach the opportunity equates to responsibility?
20. Inter-marriage between \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ resulted in producing Samaritans.
21. What emotion was present in the Samaritan that was not evident in either of the first two persons who found the wounded stranger?

### The Good Samaritan Crossword Puzzle

#### Across

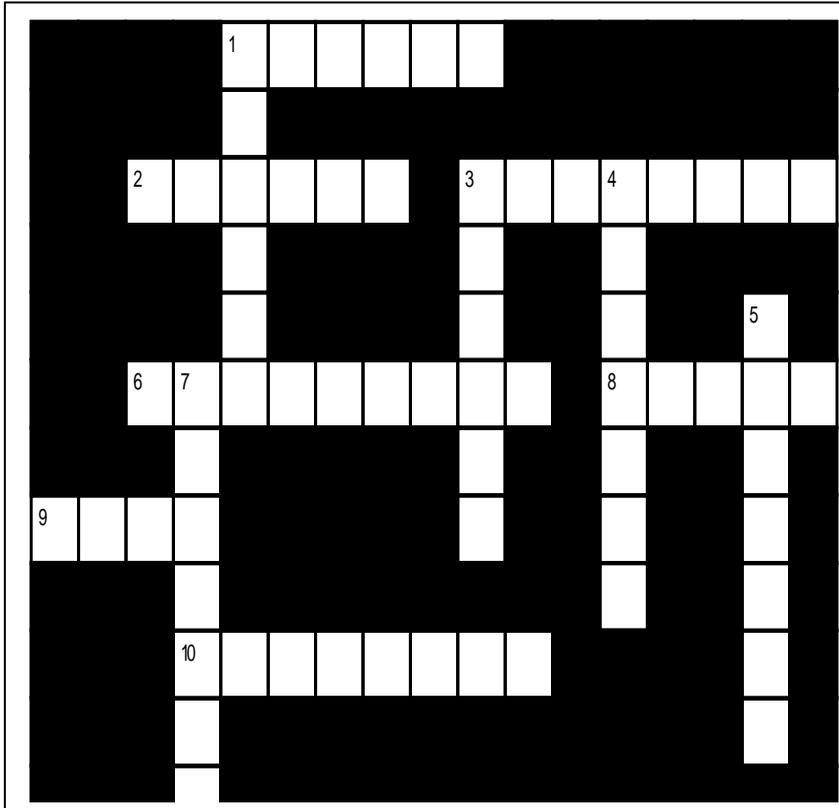
1. Passed by the injured man.
2. Nationality of the injured man.
3. Type of kingdom sought by the Jews.
6. City from which a man began his journey.
8. Number of weeks worth of money left at the inn.
9. This parable is recorded only in this book.

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10. "Who is my \_\_\_\_\_?"

#### **Down**

1. Man who asked Jesus a question.
3. Passed by the injured man.
4. Miles between the two cities.
5. City to which a man was traveling.
7. Question was about inheriting \_\_\_\_\_ life.



#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Lightfoot, 54.
- <sup>2</sup> Trench, 109.
- <sup>3</sup> Lightfoot, 56-57.
- <sup>4</sup> Wiersbe, 55.
- <sup>5</sup> Lightfoot, 56.
- <sup>6</sup> Fred Davis, "The Good Samaritan," *The Parables of Our Savior*, Indianapolis, Garfield Heights church of Christ, 88.
- <sup>7</sup> Lockyer, 261.
- <sup>8</sup> Fred Davis, 87-88.
- <sup>9</sup> Lightfoot, 56.
- <sup>10</sup> Fred Davis, 89.

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<sup>11</sup> Wiersbe, 57.

<sup>12</sup> Fred Davis, 90.

<sup>13</sup> Wiersbe, 61.

<sup>14</sup> Jackson, 72.

<sup>15</sup> Wiersbe, 61.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Fred Davis, 92.

<sup>18</sup> W. Gaddys Roy, *Sermon Outlines on the Parables of Jesus*, Anniston, AL, W. Gaddys Roy, 42.

<sup>19</sup> Lockyer, 263.

<sup>20</sup> Jackson, 73.

<sup>21</sup> Wiersbe, 64.

<sup>22</sup> Lockyer, 263-264.

<sup>23</sup> Wiersbe, 59.

<sup>24</sup> Lightfoot, 58.

<sup>25</sup> Jackson, 73.

<sup>26</sup> Lightfoot, 58.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

# Chapter 3: The Rich Fool

(Luke 12:13-21)

## INTRODUCTION

The parable of the *Rich Fool* appears only in Luke. The topic that the parable treats, though, is neither new nor found singularly in Luke's Gospel record. Our Lord here spoke about covetousness.

“And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth” (Luke 12:15).

God only needs to say something **once** for it to be so and incontrovertible. However, some subjects are addressed many times in the Bible. The repetition with which the Scriptures speak about a subject emphasizes the difficulty that mankind generally has complying with the respective divine mandate. Money is such a biblical theme. Evidently, we are especially vulnerable to temptation through improper attitudes toward material wealth. One does not have to be especially blessed with this world's goods to manifest a malignant disposition toward material prosperity. The rich, though, seem more disposed to suffer this sin. “They that trust in their wealth, and boast themselves in the multitude of their riches” (Psalm 49:6).

The Lord's people are not immune to the sin of covetousness. It is “. . . very easy . . . to overlook the sin of covetousness.”<sup>1</sup>

If the Parable of the Good Samaritan is the most practical of all the parables, the Parable of the Rich Fool is the most necessary. . . . Even among professed Christians it is so prevalent that it is scarcely recognized for what it is — a deadly sin.<sup>2</sup>

“*The Sin of Covetousness* . . . is perhaps one of the greatest sins of which professed Christians are guilty.”<sup>3</sup> Among the biblical warnings regarding covetousness, the apostle Paul instructed Timothy to especially caution the rich about covetousness. He employed some of the most forceful words anywhere in Scripture pertaining to covetousness.

“But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith content. But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness” (1 Tim. 6:9-11).

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“Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy; That they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate; Laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life” (1 Tim. 6:17-19).

The occasion of the parable was the interruption of our Lord’s discourse by a man desiring Jesus to settle a family argument.

“And one of the company said unto him, Master, speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me” (Luke 12:13).

“Many of Christ’s choicest teachings were given in response to some kind of interruption.”<sup>4</sup> “While speaking to the multitude around, including His disciples, Jesus was interrupted by a listener who presented a most inappropriate demand . . .”<sup>5</sup> Jesus, however, declined to allow himself to be distracted by the untimely plea.

“And he said unto him, Man, who made me a judge or a divider over you?” (Luke 12:14).

“Jesus rejected the appeal because it was outside the sphere of His proper mission.”<sup>6</sup> Some think that the man interrupting Jesus may have had a valid complaint. “. . . [H]is elder brother would not give him the one-third of the estate that was rightfully his.”<sup>7</sup> Irrespective of whether the petitioner was entitled to that over which he was concerned is irrelevant. Jesus Christ’s mission was not *secular*. Jesus came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10).

It was a blunt question with a blunt refusal to have anything to do with a quarrel over family property. The Jewish law was specific enough on cases of this kind. . . . (Deuteronomy 21:15-17). This was a law of long-standing that allowed no debate. The man who spoke to Jesus obviously was the younger brother.<sup>8</sup>

However, Jesus did seize the opportunity to speak concerning the underlying problem in that family which resulted in sibling rivalry. The immediate concern of which the interrupter spoke was *secular* and not directly a matter requiring the attention of the Master Teacher. The *cause* of the discord, though, was *spiritual*. Therefore, Jesus spoke concerning covetousness.

There are many people who want Jesus to solve their problems but not to change their hearts. Jesus knew that this family feud over money was only a symptom of a greater problem of covetousness. The Lord dealt with causes, not symptoms . . .<sup>9</sup>

### THE PARABLE

“And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: And he thought within himself, saying, What shall **I** do, because **I** have no room where to bestow **my** fruits? And he said, This will **I** do: **I** will pull down **my** barns, and build greater; and there will **I** bestow all **my** fruits and **my** goods. And **I** will say to **my** soul, Soul, **thou** hast much goods laid up for many years; take **thine** ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:16-21).

Jesus introduced a farmer from whom spiritual lessons could be taught. As one might suspect, the Jews, even in the time of our Lord, were still chiefly an agrarian society. The parables of Jesus are filled with illustrations drawn from the daily lives of his listeners. Farming was one popular illustration employed by Jesus. With word-pictures depicting their everyday lives, the Master Teacher used circumstances with which they were familiar to teach them spiritual truths about which they knew little or nothing.

In this instance, Jesus highlighted *negative* qualities of the farmer in his parable. Farming, though, is not inherently sinful. Concerning the rich man of the parable, “He was a successful farmer, a manager of an honorable and honest occupation.”<sup>10</sup>

The man was wealthy and apparently by legitimate means, farming. . . .  
He appears to be a farmer of wisdom and skill.”<sup>11</sup>

Evidently, the harvest was more bountiful than in any previous season for the farmer. This is implied, since: (1) He was surprised to discover that his barns were inadequate for the harvest, whereupon he proposed to make sufficient storage available for his crop. Were he accustomed to having harvests of this proportion, he would have built new barns previously. (2) He imagined that the harvest was plentiful enough to provide a good living for years to come. Had he enjoyed similar harvests before, the farmer would have retired from his daily toils already. The rich man’s new-found prosperity provided a temptation for which he was not prepared.

The rich man used an unusually high number of pronouns in his musing with himself over his dilemma. He thought that the dilemma was where to store his harvest, while he was completely unaware of the real and serious dilemma — *appearing before God unprepared for eternity*. This farmer was self-absorbed in his own secular circumstances. He was clueless about his undone spiritual condition.

“In his passion to produce and hoard up mundane things, the rich man had no thought of their divine source and the use of them for divine purposes.”<sup>12</sup> “. . . [Y]our Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt. 5:45).

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This fool forgot that “the earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof” (Psa. 50:10-12; cf. Hag. 2:8). It is a truism that “what we give, we keep; what we keep, we lose.”<sup>13</sup>

Even men’s souls belong to God. “Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die” (Ezek. 18:4). Our souls return to their rightful owner when we die (Ecc. 12:7).

If we love God and put His will first in our lives, then whatever material blessings we receive will only draw us closer to Him. Wealth will be our servant, not our master, and we will invest in things eternal.<sup>14</sup>

The rich farmer misinterpreted the significance of his bumper crop. Though he was praiseworthy for his ambition, the character in our Lord’s parable allowed otherwise noble ambition to consume him.

In itself, ambition is commendable. . . . The rich man’s ambition was selfish and sensual.<sup>15</sup>

“. . . [H]e did not distinguish between what a man has and what a man is.”<sup>16</sup> “The covetous person thinks that an abundance of things is the key to a successful life, but in this parable Jesus warned that an abundance of things could make a person a failure.”<sup>17</sup> Our farmer did not realize that “[a] vast difference exists between making a living and making a life.”<sup>18</sup> “‘Things’ are necessary to a living, but they do not make a life.”<sup>19</sup> “. . . [T]he success of a man’s work cannot be measured in terms of what he has been able to accumulate.”<sup>20</sup> “Wealth is no measure of worth.”<sup>21</sup>

A contemporary complaint toward male *breadwinners* is that they often envision that working hard and earning a living is an ample contribution to their respective families. Of course, this they should do (2 Thess. 3:10; 1 Tim. 5:8). However, a greater, personal participation is necessary to maintain a happy marriage and to successfully rear children. Likewise, each Christian must do more than pursue an honorable livelihood. *Things* are poor substitutes for faithfulness to God, a happy home and service to others.

The rich farmer’s plan was simple: “eat, drink and be merry.” The plan, though, was too simplistic, for he failed to consider his *eternal future*.

A popular expression of Greek Epicureanism was “eat, drink, be merry, for tomorrow we die” (cf. 1 Cor. 15:32). The rich fool omitted the last phrase from his quotation; he had no funeral plans for tomorrow! But where men propose, God may Dispose!<sup>22</sup>

He forgot God. The greatest blunder of the rich man was that he did not take God into account. There was nothing wrong with his decision to tear down his barns and build larger ones. A good farmer must have foresight and plan ahead. But his fatal mistake was that in all of his well-laid plans not one thought had been given to God. A common downfall of many believers is to forget God when they are making their plans.<sup>23</sup>

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There is abundant warning in Scripture of what also should be obvious — “. . . it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment” (Heb. 9:27). “Boast not thyself of to morrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth” (Prov. 27:1). “‘If the Lord wills’ must always be the attitude of a believer.”<sup>24</sup> Further, the brevity of life and the swiftness with which it can escape is set forth in these passages, too: Job 14:1; Psalm 90:10; James 4:13-16; 1 Peter 1:24; 2 Corinthians 4:17.

“But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?” (Luke 12:20).

God’s evaluation of this farmer contrasted with the esteem in which he would be held by his fellow men. God’s perspective, however, affects the eternal disposition of one’s soul and far outweighs the trifling thoughts of mere mortals (Isa. 55:8-9; 1 Cor. 1:25).

The world considered him a wise man. . . . God said that he was a “fool.”<sup>25</sup>

“The farmer was called foolish because, while he thought of his body, he forgot his spirit.”<sup>26</sup> “One may be wise in material things and a fool in spiritual things.”<sup>27</sup> “A person may be a millionaire, yet a spiritual bankrupt.”<sup>28</sup>

Obviously, the Rich Fool in our Lord’s parable could not enjoy the fruits of his labor, since he was overtaken by death.

“How much did he leave? All that he had. How foolish that he spent all his life striving for the things he had to leave behind and neglecting the true values that he could have taken with him.”<sup>29</sup>

His greater error was not making preparation for eternity. Like many of us, our farmer imagined that the time of his demise was not near. He, though, did not know that and neither can we be assured of longevity. “The rich fool, in his shortsightedness, never thought of his mortality . . .”<sup>30</sup> Recognizing the frailty and uncertainty of our tenure on earth, we must lay up spiritual treasure in heaven.

“So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:21).

“The one who keeps on treasuring (present participle) selfishly, is a spiritual pauper!”<sup>31</sup> “It is clear that God considered the farmer foolish because he thought of himself and forgot about his neighbors.”<sup>32</sup> Compare Matthew 6:19-21 and Luke 12:33-34 with Luke 12:21 above.

“Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6:19-21).

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“Sell that ye have, and give alms; provide yourselves bags which wax not old, a treasure in the heavens that faileth not, where no thief approacheth, neither moth corrupteth. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Luke 12:33-34).

Following the parable of the Rich Fool and preceding the verses immediately above, Jesus illustrated the benevolence of God toward his creation (Luke 12:22-32). Our Lord cautioned his disciples against worry and assured them that the Heavenly Father would be no less gracious toward them than he is toward wildflowers and grass.

In a concluding word to the disciples, Christ commanded them to stop worrying (the force of the present imperative) about the daily needs of this life. They were to trust in the providence of God and seek His kingdom. This did not exclude work and proper planning (2 Thess. 3:10 -11; Prov. 6:6-8), but it does put first things first (cf. Mt. 6:33).<sup>33</sup>

### CONCLUSION

The parable of the *Rich Fool* is a warning to guard against covetousness. Covetousness is “. . . an excessive or inordinate desire for gain.”<sup>34</sup>

Covetousness . . . selfish desire to have possessions for the sake of having them. . . . Covetousness is making earthly possession our chief aim for life. Life’s success is too often estimated according to wealth.<sup>35</sup>

Scripture refers to *covetousness* as idolatry, for which the wrath of God is reserved (Col. 3:5-6). Covetousness is included in several catalogs of sins and is a sin for which souls will forfeit heaven (Rom. 1:29; 1 Cor. 6:10; Eph. 5:3).

Sadly, though, covetousness has become a *respectable* sin in which Christians carelessly indulge. However, not only is covetousness sin itself, but it often prompts one to commit additional sins, too (e.g., stealing, adultery). At the very least, “[i]t can keep us from coming to the Master in total submission.”<sup>36</sup>

Jesus designated the farmer in his parable as a *fool*. The word means “. . . lack of commonsense perception of the reality of things natural and spiritual.”<sup>37</sup> He was a:

Godless Fool. David portrayed a fool as a man who affirms, “There is no God” (Psalm 14:1). The words, “There is,” are in italics, added to carry the sense of the passage. No God! is the original expression, as if the fool is one who says, “No God for me!” This implies not actual atheism, the denial of God’s existence, but a practical atheism, the denial of the moral government of God. This is why fool and wicked are sometimes treated as synonymous terms. A life lived without God is a God-less life. . . . The man Jesus described may not have been a morally bad man. There is no evidence that he had added wealth to wealth by any fraudulent practices. He appears to have been a diligent, thoughtful sagacious man. His great folly was that he was ignorant of the divine hand supplying his multiplied

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prosperity. . . . He failed to see himself as God's steward of all with which He had enriched him."<sup>38</sup>

The unchurched and church members alike ask if one can go to heaven by *just* being a good moral person. This parable, and God's Word throughout, opposes this baseless fantasy. Christians must be good moral people, but morality in the absence of redemption, New Testament worship, Christian living and Christian service is not enough to proffer the grace and mercy of God. The Rich Fool was:

The Doomed Fool. . . . Instead of barns, he had a burial; instead of anticipated luxurious laving there came a call to account to God for his hoarded possessions."<sup>39</sup>

The Rich Fool was, of course, unable to take any of his material wealth across the threshold of eternity.

Shrouds have no pockets; we leave it all behind. "Riches kept by the owner thereof to his hurt" is surely a grievous, yet common, evil under the sun (Eccl. 5:13; cf. Psa. 39:6; 49:6; Job 27:17)."<sup>40</sup>

The rich man in this parable is reminiscent of a rich man in another account Jesus presented (Luke 16:19-31). In neither instance did Jesus condemn wealth as such, but in both cases the rich men failed to act as good stewards of the wealth with which they were entrusted.

The Rich Fool and the other Rich Man contrasted with Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), did not use their riches for others. "The deceitfulness or riches" choked any desire for God and His Word. . . . The parables of The Talents and The Pounds reveal how God expects His servants to use what He has given them . . .<sup>41</sup>

Whereas Luke 12:16-21 represents what must be left behind, Luke 16:19-31 prescribes what lies ahead — as a consequence of covetousness. "Both of these rich men went to Hell, not because they were rich, but because they had left God out of their life."<sup>42</sup> The rich fool

. . . failed to be "rich toward God." This was not a tirade against riches as such, but a warning against the desire for their acquisition to dominate life and destroy all thought of and desire for God.<sup>43</sup>

"We should look beyond ourselves for opportunities to do good."<sup>44</sup> After all, the final judgment, in part, will be determined by how effectively we have used our resources and opportunities (Matt. 25:31-46). Truly, the character in the parable of the *Rich Fool*

". . . was a poor rich man. Like the Laocian Church, he was rich, increased with goods, having need of nothing, yet poor and miserable."<sup>45</sup>

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the significance of any topic being addressed repeatedly in Scripture? Demonstrate such repetition regarding other subjects than the topic of the parable of the *Rich Fool*.
2. Describe how covetousness manifests itself among Christians.
3. Explain the benefit of addressing underlying *causes* versus *symptoms* of problems.
4. Explain how an *honorable* profession can become a *dishonorable* pursuit.
5. In view of this parable, explain the dangers of unexpected prosperity? From what sources might such sudden material gain come today? How does it often affect people?
6. How can one make wealth his servant instead of his master?
7. Explain how covetousness is idolatry.

### MORE QUESTIONS

1. List the Gospel records in which the parable of the *Rich Fool* appears.
2. What is the topic addressed in this parable?
3. What prompted Jesus to speak the parable of the *Rich Fool*?
4. What is odd about the use of pronouns in this parable? What do they indicate?
5. Why were the parables of Jesus so effective in conveying spiritual truths?
6. List some of the things that the *Rich Fool* evidently forgot.
7. In what way can a husband and father contribute to a happy marriage and the successful rearing of his children?
8. What was the simplistic plan of the rich farmer in this parable?
9. Why should it not be a surprise that death will visit us, too?
10. How comforting is the high esteem of men when God calls one a *fool*?
11. How much of his wealth did the Rich Fool leave behind when he died?
12. What relationship does one's *treasure* sustain to his *heart*?
13. How is God's treatment of wildflowers and grass encouraging to Christians?
14. Is covetousness serious enough to prevent one from going to heaven? How do you know?
15. Describe practical atheism.
16. Can one expect to go to heaven by being *just* a good moral person? Please elaborate.
17. How could one be a *poor rich man*?

### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Lindsey Warren, "The Rich Fool," *The Parables of Our Savior*, Garfield Heights church of Christ, 171.

<sup>2</sup> Lightfoot, 69-70.

<sup>3</sup> Roy, 45.

<sup>4</sup> Wiersbe, 111.

<sup>5</sup> Lockyer, 267.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Wiersbe, 111.

<sup>8</sup> Lightfoot, 68-69.

- <sup>9</sup> Wiersbe, 111-112.  
<sup>10</sup> Roy, 44.  
<sup>11</sup> Jackson, 69.  
<sup>12</sup> Lockyer, 267-268.  
<sup>13</sup> Jackson, 70.  
<sup>14</sup> Wiersbe, 120.  
<sup>15</sup> Lockyer, 268.  
<sup>16</sup> Lightfoot, 70  
<sup>17</sup> Wiersbe, 112.  
<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 114-115.  
<sup>19</sup> Jackson, 70.  
<sup>20</sup> Lightfoot, 69.  
<sup>21</sup> Wiersbe, 113.  
<sup>22</sup> Jackson., 69.  
<sup>23</sup> Lightfoot, 72.  
<sup>24</sup> Wiersbe, 119.  
<sup>25</sup> Roy, 45.  
<sup>26</sup> Warren, 174  
<sup>27</sup> Jackson, 70.  
<sup>28</sup> Lockyer, 268.  
<sup>29</sup> Lightfoot, 72.  
<sup>30</sup> Lockyer, 269.  
<sup>31</sup> Jackson, 70.  
<sup>32</sup> Warren, 173.  
<sup>33</sup> Jackson, 70.  
<sup>34</sup> Lightfoot, 69.  
<sup>35</sup> Roy, 45.  
<sup>36</sup> Warren, 171.  
<sup>37</sup> Lockyer, 267.  
<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.  
<sup>40</sup> Jackson, 69-70.  
<sup>41</sup> Lockyer, 268.  
<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.  
<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 268  
<sup>44</sup> Jackson, 70.  
<sup>45</sup> Lockyer, 267.

# Chapter 4: The Barren Fig Tree

(Luke 13:1-9)

## INTRODUCTION

The backdrop to this parable concerns the perennial and common misconception that bad things happen to people as retributions from God. Some in the audience of Christ on this occasion told of Galilean Jews who were slaughtered in the Temple, while they were in the act of offering sacrifices. Evidently, Roman soldiers who were chargeable to Pilate killed those worshippers.

“There were present at that season some that told him of the Galilaeans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices” (Luke 13:1).

Our Lord denied that those Galilaeans or those, for instance, upon whom the tower of Siloam fell, were more deserving to die for their sins than anyone present in the crowd. Jesus used this moment as an opportunity to teach about *repentance*. All mankind has a common need to repent of sins (Acts 17:30-31).

“And Jesus answering said unto them, Suppose ye that these Galilaeans were sinners above all the Galilaeans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish. Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish” (Luke 13:2-5).

An aunt of mine became pregnant with her last child, somewhat unexpectedly, when she was 40 years old. Unfortunately, the baby was born with some medical difficulties. My aunt proceeded to pronounce this as retribution upon her by God for such things as being unnecessarily offensive toward other people, including her family. The friends of Job could not imagine the calamities that befell their friend as anything besides just retribution by God for some heinous, secret sin, of which they were sure Job was guilty. The inhabitants of Melita supposed that the apostle Paul was bitten by a poisonous snake as Supreme retribution for some evil Paul must have done.

“And when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks, and laid them on the fire, there came a viper out of the heat, and fastened on his hand. And when the barbarians saw the venomous beast hang on his hand, they said among themselves, No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he hath escaped the sea, yet vengeance suffereth not to live” (Acts 28:3-4).

Even the disciples of Jesus subscribed to this theory of God-authored retribution.

“And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind from his birth. And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man, or his

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parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:1-2).

My aunt was mistaken. Job’s friends also incorrectly attributed some unknown evil to Job. Further, the natives of Melita were wrong about Paul, too. Our Lord’s disciples misspoke about the relationship between sin and dire physical circumstances. The misguided notion that God summarily metes physical punishments to individuals is not restricted to belief by ancient peoples. Our neighbors often believe the same untruth.

This parable is an illustration and expansion of Jesus’ teaching on repentance. It was a common belief in Bible times that sickness and disease and violent death were the direct results of some wicked deed he had done. With this confused conception of sin, a group of people approached Jesus and told him about a disaster that had recently taken place.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus followed his teaching about repentance with the parable of the *Barren Fig Tree*. This parable, also, appears only in Luke’s Gospel record.

This parable must not be confused with the parabolic miracle of the fig tree which Jesus cursed (Matthew 21:18-22; Mark 11:12-25). The only common bond between the two parables is the fact that there were no figs on either tree. Jesus, as we know, made constant illustrative use of the fig tree (Matthew 24:32-33; Mark 13:28-29; Luke 21:29-30).<sup>2</sup>

Since the fig tree is prominent in this parable, besides used in other instructive illustrations, acquaintance with the fig tree is useful at this juncture. Neil Lightfoot’s description of the fig tree in Palestine is as follows.

The fig tree in ancient Palestine was the most important of all trees. In a warm climate, like Palestine, it was fruitful during much of the year. Its so-called “immature figs” began to appear in April; then followed the two main crops, the early one in June and the later one in August. The fig tree was valued for other reasons. Although it was not a large tree, ranging on average from ten to fifteen feet high, its foliage was remarkably dense, well-suited for a cool shade from the summer heat. The fig tree was recognized as a symbol of peace and prosperity. In the time of Solomon it is said that “Judah and



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Israel dwelt in safety, from Dan even to Beer-sheba, every man under his vine, and under his fig tree.” Thus the fig tree was an invaluable tree and was cultivated all over the land of Palestine.<sup>3</sup>

### THE PARABLE

“He spake also this parable; A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground? And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it: And if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down” (Luke 13:6-9).

The allusion to fruitfulness, the anticipated result of farming, is used frequently in the Bible. Likewise, the destruction of crops that are fruitless is a common theme throughout Scripture. “And now also the ax is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore **every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire**” (Matt. 3:10).

“Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their **fruits**. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so **every good tree bringeth forth good fruit**; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. **Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them**” (Matt. 7:15-20).

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. **Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away**: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit. Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same **bringeth forth much fruit**: for without me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in me, he is **cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned**” (John 15:1-6).

The parable of the *Barren Fig Tree* refers to the Jews — as individuals and as a nation. This is precisely the way in which fruitfulness Vs. fruitlessness is depicted of Israel in the Old Testament.

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“Now will I sing to my wellbeloved a song of my beloved touching his vineyard. My wellbeloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill: And he fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vine, and built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a winepress therein: and he looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard. What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes? And now go to; I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard: I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be eaten up; and break down the wall thereof, and it shall be trodden down: And I will lay it waste: it shall not be pruned, nor digged; but there shall come up briars and thorns: I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For **the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant:** and he looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry” (Isaiah 5:1-7).

Like the parable under review in this chapter, Isaiah 5:1-7 promised impending destruction for failure of the Jews to be fruitful. They were unfruitful despite special provisions to promote their fruitfulness. The same scenario unfolds in the parable of the *Barren Fig Tree*. Directly, both passages applied to the Jews as individuals and as a people. “But to Israel he saith, All day long I have stretched forth my hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people” (Rom. 10:21). Indirectly, the parable applies to Spiritual Israel or the church that Jesus built (Matt. 16:18). In any case, the barren fig tree represents fruitless children of God.

In the parable of the *Barren Fig Tree*, the man or owner represents God. The vine dresser is Jesus Christ. The barren fig tree is the Jewish nation. The vineyard in which the tree of the parable was planted represents special divine privilege.

As the fig tree was planted in a vineyard, the Jewish nation was nurtured like a favored child with the blessings of divine revelation and guidance. Throughout the years of the Old Testament the Lord of Hosts, like the owner of the vineyard, had come in hope of finding some evidence of fruit on the tree.<sup>4</sup>

The peculiar privilege of the fig tree illustrated the Jewish nation (Isaiah 5:1-7); and the vineyard, the enclosure of privilege, symbolized the nation secluded from all others, and especially honored by God with the light of supernatural revelation through the Prophets, and all the influences of supernatural grace.<sup>5</sup>

The three years in the parable during which the owner sought figs and found none are equivalent to the long-suffering or patience of God. However, the patience of God

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toward rebellious Israel was not infinite. Since the return of Judah from Babylonian captivity, God demonstrated great patience with the Jews. Consequently, the children of God were afforded ample opportunity to repent — as individuals and as a nation. Old Testament prophets, John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit and the apostles preceded the exhaustion of divine patience for the Jews. The apostle Paul earnestly desired the national repentance of his people (Rom. 10:1-3).

The land owner in the parable ordered the fruitless tree cut down. The charge to cut down the tree is figurative for the then imminent destruction of the Jewish nation for its persistent rebellion. The destruction of Jerusalem was the manifestation of the final exhaustion of divine patience toward old Israel.

Yet even Divine patience can be exhausted. God waits long, but the Scriptures solemnly warn that there is a limit to His waiting.<sup>6</sup>

Cut it down! Such was the end of divine cultivation, divine expectation and divine disappointment. Such a sentence was a righteous one, for Israel, in spite of all her privileges, was a fruitless tree; and a fruitless tree was useless. It cumbered the ground, occupying room where another tree might have grown fruit abundant. Is there not in this parable a solemn warning for the Church, as well as for each professed member of it?<sup>7</sup>

“The cumbering of the ground implies more than it occupied a place which might be more profitably filled; the barren tree injured the land around.”<sup>8</sup> “The soil was too valuable to waste on a fruitless tree, so it must perish, and its room be given to another tree.”<sup>9</sup> The implication is that, likewise, God’s children can contribute to the delinquency of their fellows.

The fig tree was not only useless, but it was also harmful. . . . The unfaithful and unfruitful church member does harm. a. He takes zeal from the faithful members. b. He keeps others from obeying the truth (1 Cor. 5:6).<sup>10</sup>

Fruitlessness can cause a congregation to die (Rev. 3:1-6). Unfruitfulness can be attributable to “works of the flesh” (Gal. 5:19-21) or merely from inactivity (Matt. 25:31-46; Jam. 4:17).

“Time for repentance (for all men) is limited . . .”<sup>11</sup> The lamentable removal of the Jews as the special beneficiaries of God’s blessings created a void. This void was filled with the widespread conversion of non-Jews to Christianity, beginning in the first century.

The divine fiat, cut it down, was carried out in the decree for “the destruction of Jerusalem, and the removal of the Jews from their vineyard privileges, preparatory to, and in order to, the calling of the Gentiles.” The stroke of justice was arrested for a season . . .<sup>12</sup>

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Romans 11:17-24 portrays the Jews as natural branches from an olive tree, which being unproductive are pruned. The Gentiles, represented as branches from a wild olive tree, were grafted into the goodly olive tree. That passage depicts the possibility of restoration of the Jews or natural branches to the favor of God. The Gentiles are cautioned that selected natural branches can be grafted back on the tree with greater ease than the grafting of wild branches (Gentiles).

The gardener's plea to allow the tree another opportunity to produce fruit is figurative for allowing the Jewish nation more time to repent. The vinedresser does not plead for a complete reprieve for the barren fig tree.

He did not plead for the indefinite existence of a fruitless tree. He only asked for one more year in which to adopt the most stringent measures for stimulating the barren tree into fruitfulness. If under further treatment it bears fruit, then the vine dresser knew that the owner would gladly permit the tree to retain its privileged position; but if it persisted in its barrenness, then he would abandon it to its deserved fate. All that was asked for was a respite or postponement.<sup>13</sup>

He only asks for an extension, which after if the tree is still barren it should be destroyed.

God does not want anyone to perish, but to repent. Nevertheless, at a predetermined time in the mind of God, divine wrath will engulf the impenitent at the end of time.

“The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up” (2 Pet. 3:9-10).

“Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?” (Ezek. 33:11).

“The judgment of God is not hasty, but it is certain (Eccl. 8:11-13; 2 Pet. 3:9).”<sup>14</sup>

“Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil. Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before him: But it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow; because he feareth not before God” (Ecc. 8:11-13).

### CONCLUSION

God expects his children to be productive or fruitful. Another way of phrasing the same concept is that God requires obedience of his creation — inclusive of his children. The unmitigated wrath of the Godhead will confront all disobedient souls in the last day.

“And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power” (2 Thess. 1:7-9).

The only way in which souls can avoid the righteous indignation and the vengeance of God is to repent of wickedness while there is yet time. The parable of the *Barren Fig Tree* illustrates the hopelessness of mistaking the long-suffering of God for divine disregard for our sins. Those who despise the patience of God are preparing themselves for eternal dishonor in a devil’s hell. God is patient to a point, after which God will judge the world — *ready or not!*

Almighty God, by reason of creation and his eternal omnipotence, exercises the divine right to intervene in the lives and eternity of mankind. Mere mortals are powerless to challenge the province of God to require compliance with heavenly mandates — or face sorrowful, eternal consequences. Though one may pretend to deny the existence of God now, or though acknowledging the being of God to defy his sovereignty, every soul shall confirm the divine nature of God at the commencement of forever.

“For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God” (Rom. 14:10-11).

Mankind is obliged to concede the supremacy of God — or suffer unimaginable, unending and unhappy consequences.

Every man should recognize and honor the truth that God is the owner of the universe. . . . Every man should recognize that God has the right to expect fruit — the right kind of fruit — from each man. . . . Every man should recognize and honor the truth that God had (has) and exercised the right of interceding in human situation. . . . Every man should both recognize and honor the truth that God has the right to stipulate conditions with men (who desire to be saved) must comply. . . . Every man should recognize and honor the truth that God has the right of disposition.<sup>15</sup>

Because the vineyard and the tree planted in it belonged to the owner, and he had the moral and absolute right of expectation of fruit, he likewise had the punitive right of, as the owner, destroying anything barren and useless on his soil.<sup>16</sup>

## Chapter 4: The Barren Fig Tree

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Dear Reader, have you repented of your sins? “I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish” (Luke 13:3).

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Contrast the biblical relationship between sin and physical consequences with popular, but false notions about the same.
2. If God does not want anyone to perish, why, then, does he threaten to exercise his wrath?

### MORE QUESTIONS

1. What was the occasion of the parable of the *Barren Fig Tree*?
2. Enumerate references in this chapter to instances that have been mistakenly thought to be examples of the retribution of God toward mankind.
3. Cite some other references to fig trees in the teachings of Jesus Christ.
4. Describe the fig tree.
5. Cite three New Testament references to bearing fruit.
6. What does the barren fig tree represent?
7. Who does the vine dresser represent?
8. What does the vineyard represent?
9. What does the phrase “three years” in the parable represent?
10. What characters brought messages from God to man preceding the exhaustion of God’s patience?
11. For what did the apostle Paul long?
12. What did the cutting of the tree in the parable represent?
13. In what ways was the unfruitful fig tree hurtful of the ground in which it was planted? What is the spiritual application?
14. What are some of the dangers of fruitlessness?
15. How did the spiritual deficiency of the Jews affect the Gentiles?
16. How can one successfully avoid the wrath of God?
17. What gives God the right to intervene in the life and eternity of mankind?

## Chapter 4: The Barren Fig Tree

### The Barren Fig Tree Crossword Puzzle

#### Across

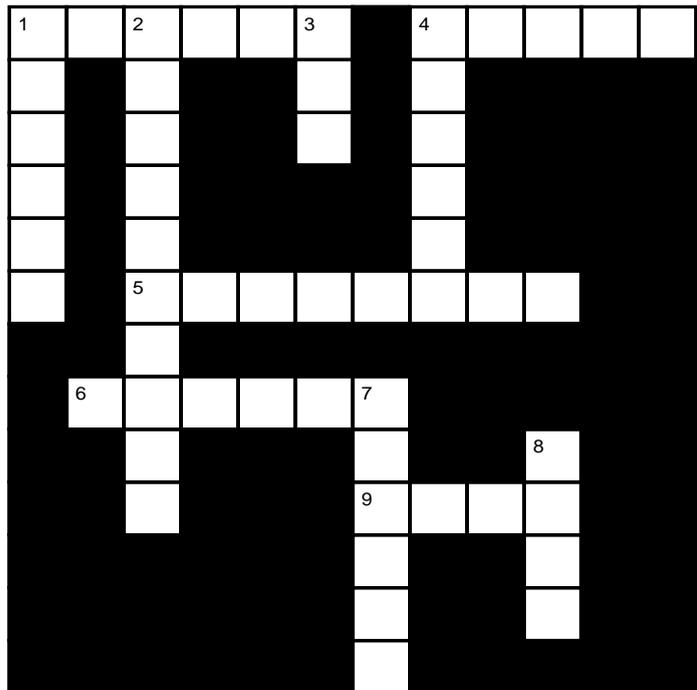
1. Instruction Jesus gave for mankind to avoid perishing.
4. Number of years the owner sought figs and found none.
5. Number of people killed by a falling tower.
6. Tower that fell.
9. This parable appears only in this book.

#### Down

1. Book that refers to Jews as natural branches of an olive tree.
2. The fig tree was a symbol of peace and \_\_\_\_\_.
3. Number of crops harvested annually from the fig tree.
4. Galilean Jews were killed there.
7. Natives of this island thought Paul was wicked because he was bitten by a snake.
8. To whom this parable applied.

#### ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Lightfoot, 75.
  - <sup>2</sup> Lockyer, 270.
  - <sup>3</sup> Lightfoot, 75-76.
  - <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.
  - <sup>5</sup> Lockyer, 271.
  - <sup>6</sup> Lightfoot, 79.
  - <sup>7</sup> Lockyer, 273.
  - <sup>8</sup> Trench, 123.
  - <sup>9</sup> Lockyer, 271.
  - <sup>10</sup> Roy, 48.
  - <sup>11</sup> Jackson, 75.
  - <sup>12</sup> Lockyer, 272.
  - <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
  - <sup>14</sup> Roy, 48.
  - <sup>15</sup> Thomas Warren, 181-187.
  - <sup>16</sup> Lockyer, 272.



# Chapter 5: The Great Supper

(Luke 14:15-24)

## INTRODUCTION

This parable also is peculiar to Luke. The parable in Matthew 22:1-14, though similar, is different from the parable of the *Great Supper*.

*The Royal Marriage Feast* was spoken at an early date in our Lord's ministry; *The Great Supper*, at the end of His ministry during the Passion Week. The *former* was addressed to the multitude in the Temple; the *latter* to the guests in a private house. The *former* displays messengers treated with violence; the *latter* shows them receiving excuses. In the *former*, the invited are destroyed and their city burned; in the *latter*, despisers of the invitation are merely excluded.<sup>1</sup>

The background preceding the parable of the *Great Supper* begins in Luke 14:1. Verse one prepares the setting as it reveals that Jesus was guest of a "chief pharisee" among several others who also were invited. This meal and the subsequent speeches by our Lord, inclusive of the parable now under review, occurred on "the sabbath day."

Verses 2-6 concern an event that may have been staged to entrap Jesus. An unlikely attendee to this gathering, a man afflicted with what Scripture notes as "dropsy," was conspicuously before Jesus. Intently, the host and other guests watched him, perhaps supposing that Jesus faced a dilemma. Our Lord directly addressed the potential predicament:

"And Jesus answering spake unto the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath day? And they held their peace. And he took him, and healed him, and let him go; And answered them, saying, Which of you shall have an ass or an ox fallen into a pit, and will not straightway pull him out on the sabbath day? And they could not answer him again to these things" (Luke 14:2-6).

In verse 7, Jesus observed the manner in which diners selected their seats. We would say of such a spectacle that guests were jockeying for prestigious place settings at or noticeably close to the head table. Upon seeing this, our Lord recited the parable of the *Chief Seats* (Luke 14:8-11). Jesus taught humility and lectured his fellow guests regarding their errant behavior.

Next, Jesus addressed his host. Our Lord criticized him for only inviting those who were able and desirous of likewise inviting him to share their hospitality (Luke 14:12-14). Basically, Jesus accused the host and his friends of running a ". . . mutual admiration society."<sup>2</sup> Rather, the riches with which we may be blessed enable us as stewards of God

## Chapter 5: The Great Supper

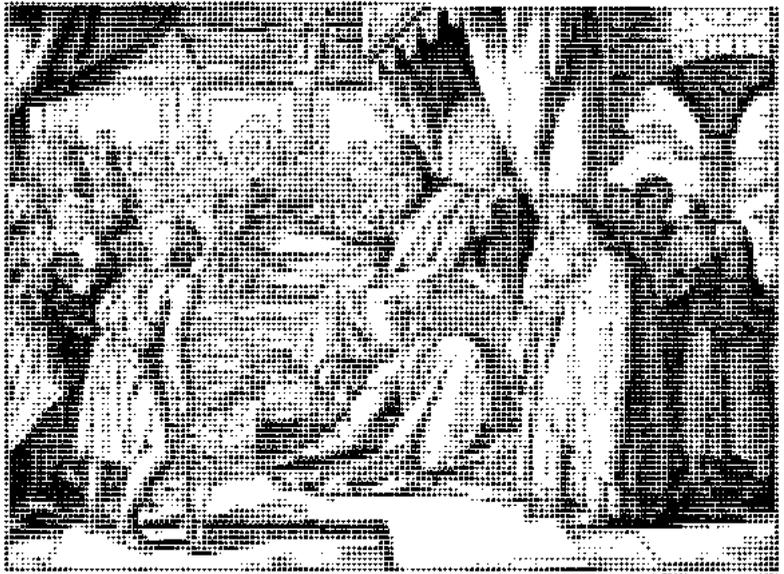
to demonstrate hospitality toward those in need. “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (Heb. 13:2).

“Then said he also to him that bade him, When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, neither thy kinsmen, nor thy rich neighbours; lest they also bid thee again, and a recompense be made thee. But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: And thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just” (Luke 14:12-14).

Doubtless, both the other guests and the host were greatly displeased when they heard these two denunciations of their deportment. Perhaps in an attempt to lessen the tension of the moment, one guest interjected a comment. “And when one of them that sat at meat with him heard these things, he said unto him, Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God” (Luke 14:15).

This interjection by a fellow Jew and guest promoted the widely held misconception of the Jews regarding the future kingdom of God. As a people, the Jews overlooked in the Old Testament prophecies about the Lord’s kingdom allowance for the inclusion of non-Jews (e.g., Gen. 12:3; Isa. 2:2; 62:2; Joel 2:28-3:2). They thought that their ancestral relationship with Abraham — by physical birth — would guarantee them (and them alone) inclusion in the kingdom of heaven. John the Baptist warned the Pharisees and Sadducees regarding this malignant thought: “And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham” (Matt. 3:9; Luke 3:8).

Essentially, the outspoken one changed the subject through a reference to an event more important than the gathering at hand. Borrowing the figure from the meal he was then attending, the man sought to move the evening along from those tense moments. It is as if he were saying: “The only thing that really matters is the future kingdom of heaven, in which all Jews will be included anyway.”



Through the parable of the *Great Supper* (continuing the same figure), Jesus proceeded to dispel the erroneous notion verbalized by his self-appointed apologist. “. . . Christ laid bare in the pungent story of the great banquet, the folly of the Pharisaic attitude toward the Kingdom of God.”<sup>3</sup>

## Chapter 5: The Great Supper

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### THE PARABLE

“Then said he unto him, A certain man made a great supper, and bade many: And sent his servant at supper time to say to them that were bidden, Come; for all things are now ready. And they all with one consent began to make excuse. The first said unto him, I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it: I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them: I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come. So that servant came, and showed his lord these things. Then the master of the house being angry said to his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind. And the servant said, Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room. And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. For I say unto you, That none of those men which were bidden shall taste of my supper” (Luke 14:16-24).

Verses 16-17 portray the readiness of “a great supper.” Guests were invited previously, and it is implied accepted the initial invitation. Now at last the meal is ready and the invited guests need merely to be apprised that it is time to “Come.”

First, in keeping with Oriental customs, a general announcement was sent out to inform everybody of the coming event. The date was specified, but the exact hour was not. On the stated day, when all the preparations had been made and everything was in order, the man sent out his servant to tell his invited friends that the hour had arrived for the supper.<sup>4</sup>

The man in the parable who made a great supper represents God who invites mortals into the eternal bliss of heaven with him. The making ready corresponds to the great and lengthy preparation God made for the reception of humanity. This preparation occurred prior to the coming of Christ. The great supper is equivalent to the blessings of the Gospel — namely, eternal salvation. The invitation to the great supper is associated with the expansive and generous Divine, spiritual invitation — the Gospel itself. The servant who announced the readiness of the dinner represents Jesus Christ. Those bidden were the Jews who were the special object of God’s benevolence throughout Judaism. The message that “all things are now ready” corresponds to “the fulness of time” (Gal. 4:4; Titus 1:3; 1 Pet. 1:20). Further, the not mentioned but implied bearers of the earlier, initial invitation portray the Old Testament prophets, John the Baptist, the apostles and the seventy.

In verses 18-20 the unthinkable happened. Did you ever invite someone for supper on an agreed upon date and time, go to the trouble and expense of preparing the meal, and then, with no notice, your guests just do not arrive? If so, you know some of the exasperation depicted in this parable.

## Chapter 5: The Great Supper

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The guests were really insulting Him, for in Middle Eastern countries, to turn down an invitation was a serious thing. It could even lead to war if the rejected invitation came from a leader.<sup>5</sup>

Further, the invited guests in the parable of the *Great Supper* were blameworthy for “. . . neglect of their given word, — for we must suppose that they had already accepted the invitation . . .”<sup>6</sup>

The excuses offered were just that: **excuses**. They amounted to thinly veiled exclamations of: **“I don’t want to come!”**

All three excuses were pretexts. With a little forethought, each person could have made arrangements that would have enabled him to go. But the real truth was, they did not want to go.<sup>7</sup>

The ones making the excuses probably did not conspire with each other, but merely exhibited the same careless regard for the host and his prepared meal. “Not all consulted together — but all . . . had the same sentiments.”<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the three excuses recorded in the parable are representative, not exhaustive, of the types of excuses that doubtless would be entertained then or now. Besides, *three* excuses could hardly be thought representative of the *number* of invited guests to a *great supper*.

The first type of excuse offered was the dubious assertion that one intended guest had made a real estate transaction, and that he needed to examine it **now**. This excuse readily reveals one of two things: (1) The man is a poor liar, or (2) He is extremely gullible if not outright senseless. The second excuse was no more believable than the first excuse. Who buys farm animals without first determining their fitness? Whereas the first two excuses were robed in apologies, the third excuse was more blunt. “. . . I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come” (Luke 14:20).

Any man who buys a piece of property before he looks at it is a fool, and so is the man who purchases 10 oxen without first proving them (that would be like buying a car you never drove). The man who was newly married could have brought his bride with him. These people did not reject the invitation because they were involved in bad activities. . . . Most of the people who reject God’s gracious invitation today are not involved in gross iniquities. They are just too involved in the everyday affairs of life and too busy to think seriously about what they are doing.<sup>9</sup>

. . . one is very unwise to buy a field without first seeing it. . . . The oxen were now his. He could try them at any time. . . . The wife was now his and she would keep.<sup>10</sup>

These excuses are remarkably similar to excuses one might be heard today making to avoid some occasion to which he is obligated. The things with which the ones in the parable busied themselves and used as excuses were not sinful things. It is clear that secular and family responsibilities which rightfully have their places in our lives can

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interfere with other commitments. The most important commitments about which we need to be concerned and need to insulate from interruption are our *spiritual responsibilities*. In other words, seek the kingdom of God first or foremost rather than the sundry things of life (Luke 12:22-32). We must not even love our families **more** than our Lord (Luke 14:26; Matt. 10:37).

However, we, like the characters in this parable, are often the most enamored with *things* that pertain to our mundane existence on this physical sphere called *earth*.

“The three excuses may be divided into two classes: the first two have to do with earthly possessions and the third concerns earthly ties.”<sup>11</sup>

But the three excuses are species of the thorns that grow up and choke the Word. . . . all three express the same satisfied immersion in worldly interests . . . Multitudes today are invited to the gospel feast, but respond in the same way to the invitation as those Jesus described almost two millenniums ago.<sup>12</sup>

We respond best regarding the tangible and whatever we can grasp in our hands. We are beings that major in the five senses. The intangible and spiritual matters are areas in which mortals appear to experience greater difficulty. Doubtless, this is so because we are obviously physical creatures, living in a physical world. The laws of nature that govern this world are sometimes painfully apparent to every accountable person. Learning spiritual laws requires more skill and persistence.

There is a correlation, though, between the physical world and the spiritual world in which we also live. The *things* or *relationships* enjoyed on earth affect our spiritual health, too. It is woefully alarming to note that circumstances that are innocent of themselves can contribute to our spiritual deficiencies. Especially of note in the parable: “. . . none of the guests are kept away by occupations in themselves sinful . . .”<sup>13</sup> “It is a paradox that something as lovely and sweet as home can stand between a man and his God.”<sup>14</sup>

. . . things which are good and legitimate can cost us our soul. . . . Need to carefully take to heart the lesson that Legitimate Business and Lawful and Pure affections may be road-blocks on heaven’s highway and can cost us our soul.<sup>15</sup>

. . . the things they presented as excuses were proper in themselves, when kept in their own place. . . . How tragic it is when affairs mercantile, agricultural, financial, clerical, or industrial leave us no time for God! . . . But marital union and family obligation, if rightfully and righteously undertaken, never keep us from God or from fellowship with His saints.<sup>16</sup>

Verses 21-23 chronicle the anger of the host and his ensuing plan to yet provide diners for his great supper, now waiting. Some people delude themselves by thinking that the God of love (1 John 4:8, 16) is not also a God of anger (Exod. 4:14; Num. 25:4; Mark

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3:5) or wrath (Rom. 1:18; 12:19; Eph. 5:6; Col. 3:6). Likewise, the God of heaven sought replacement guests to replace those who in the figure of the parable of the *Great Supper* made excuses. The intended guests who made excuses not to come to the supper represent the majority of the Jews in Christ's ministry who rejected him. The excuses offered throughout time may vary somewhat from these excuses, however, they are no more satisfactory with which to meet God in eternity. "Sinners, who persistently and blatantly continue to reject the overtures of divine mercy, will tremble too late when they find themselves in the hands of an angry God."<sup>17</sup>

The servant was sent to obtain guests from among the people passing by in the streets. "Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind" (Luke 14:21). Room still remaining, the servant was sent again, not to merely invite, but to **compel** still others to attend the great supper (Luke 14:22-23). One writer observed regarding these two acquisitions of guests:

The maimed, blind, etc. denote the publicans, harlots (Mt. 21:31). The guests who were compelled to come in from the "highways and hedges" represent the Gentiles.<sup>18</sup>

Another writer made an interesting observation regarding the word "compel."

Compel them to come in. . . . moral compulsion. . . . these houseless wanderers would think themselves so unworthy of it as not to believe it, and could scarcely be induced without much persuasion to enter the rich man's dwelling, and share in his entertainment.<sup>19</sup>

Since the host represents God, we should be comforted to realize that **all** people are welcome in the kingdom of heaven. There are none whose sins are such that they cannot be forgiven upon their repentance and obedience to the Gospel of Christ. "God is an international God; He made provisions for Jew and Gentile."<sup>20</sup>

Nobody is left out of God's gracious invitation. . . . Only the Lord welcomes people nobody else wants.<sup>21</sup>

The apostle Paul penned, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16).

The parable of the *Great Supper* concluded with the formal exclusion of the original guests who had excluded themselves. "For I say unto you, That none of those men which were bidden shall taste of my supper" (Luke 14:24). Of course, the same scenario will be unfolded before God in final judgment. By their failure to accept the invitation of God on his terms, those who will be eternally lost will have already excluded themselves from the grace and mercy of God. At the judgment, these will hear their formal exclusion from eternal heaven pronounced.

2. Those who made excuses were not permitted to eat of the supper. Lk. 14:24. 3. Those today who make excuses for not obeying the gospel will not enter heaven.<sup>22</sup>

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Exclusion from the Great Supper represents exclusion from the kingdom of heaven, thereby assigning those excluded to the only other eternal disposition — a devil's hell. "He calls the spiritually sick and needy, while those who are rich in their own merits exclude themselves and are excluded by Him."<sup>23</sup>

The majority of Jews contemporary with Jesus of Nazareth through the present have spurned the Christ — the fulfillment of the very prophecies in which they placed hope for Israel. "'None'[in Luke 14:24] is a synecdoche (whole put for the part) showing that the Jewish rejection of Christ would be substantial (cf. Rom. 11:25)."<sup>24</sup> Romans 11:12-32 records the misfortune of unbelief by the Jews and the consequent good fortune of belief by the Gentiles. Now, all people, Jews and non-Jews have equal opportunity to accept the divine invitation.

### CONCLUSION

"This further parable, suggested by the meal at the Pharisee's house, is termed great because of the many invited and also because of the greatness of the One symbolized by the lord providing the supper."<sup>25</sup>

The parable was contemporary in that it pictured the current Jewish rejection of Him; it was prophetic in revealing the acceptance of Gentiles into the kingdom.<sup>26</sup>

The parable is tragic because it depicts the sorry lot of mankind unprepared and often unwilling to accept God's invitation to spend forever with him in eternal bliss. It is frightening to ponder that even the bountiful blessings of which we have been recipients from a benevolent God may interfere with our spiritual journey upward. Of the first invited guests we close with this note: "They had nothing which it was not lawful to have, but the undue love of earthly possessions ultimately excluded them from the feast."<sup>27</sup>

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does something that is not sinful of itself become sinful?
2. List several things or circumstances, though not sinful, that could interfere with faithfulness.
3. Why is it that even Christians more easily identify with physical things than with spiritual things?
4. Discuss the kind of excuses that God is likely to hear from our generation and the predictable reaction of God toward them.
5. How did the rejection of Christ by the Jews affect Gentiles?

### MORE QUESTIONS

1. In which Gospel records is the parable of the *Great Supper* found?
2. The parable of the *Great Supper* is similar to what other parable of our Lord?

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3. Contrast the two parables above.
4. Describe the place where Jesus presented the parable of the *Great Supper*.
5. On what day of the week did Jesus recite this parable?
6. Who was the unlikely guest at the meal and how did his presence pose a potential dilemma for Jesus?
7. What parable did Jesus tell immediately before the parable of the *Great Supper*?
8. What was the theme of that parable and what prompted Jesus to give it?
9. For what did Jesus criticize the host of the supper?
10. Someone changed the subject and focus from the guests and host at the supper to what?
11. What was the common Jewish misconception regarding the kingdom of heaven?
12. Toward whom was the parable of the *Great Supper* spoken?
13. When would the invited guests for the banquet have received their initial invitation?
14. What is implied regarding their stated attitude toward that initial invitation?
15. Identify what the following characters and things in the parable represent: the host, making ready, the great supper, the invitation to the supper, the servant, those bidden, the message that “all things are now ready,” those who delivered the initial invitation.
16. What attitude did the excuse making guests demonstrate toward the host?
17. What did the failure of the invited guests to come to the supper indicate about them?
18. Despite the excuses, what was the real reason the invited guests did not attend the supper?
19. What two types of excuses were offered?
20. In what way was the third excuse more blunt than the previous two?
21. What were the two immediate responses of the host when apprised that his invited guests refused to come?
22. Whom did the invited guests who refused to come represent?
23. Describe the replacement guests for the banquet and who they represented.
24. What was the final action of the host regarding the invited guests who did not attend? What does that action represent?

### ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Lockyer, 275.

<sup>2</sup> Wiersbe, 92.

<sup>3</sup> Lockyer, 275.

<sup>4</sup> Neil R. Lightfoot, *The Parables of Jesus, II*, Abilene, ACU Press, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Wiersbe, 96.

<sup>6</sup> Trench, 128.

<sup>7</sup> Lockyer, 276.

<sup>8</sup> Cline, 128.

<sup>9</sup> Wiersbe, 95-96.

<sup>10</sup> Roy, 56-57.

<sup>11</sup> Lightfoot, II, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Lockyer, 277.

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<sup>13</sup> Trench, 128.

<sup>14</sup> Lightfoot, II, 13.

<sup>15</sup> William S. Cline, "The Great Supper," *The Parables of Our Savior*, Indianapolis, Garfield Heights church of Christ, 129.

<sup>16</sup> Lockyer, 276-277.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

<sup>18</sup> Jackson, 39.

<sup>19</sup> Trench, 130.

<sup>20</sup> Jackson, 40.

<sup>21</sup> Wiersbe, 95-97.

<sup>22</sup> Roy, 58.

<sup>23</sup> Trench, 129.

<sup>24</sup> Jackson, 39.

<sup>25</sup> Lockyer, 275.

<sup>26</sup> Jackson, 38.

<sup>27</sup> Trench, 129.

# Chapter 6: The Lost Sheep

(Luke 15:1-7)

## INTRODUCTION

The parable of the *Lost Sheep* is unique to Luke's Gospel record, though a similar reference appears in Matthew's account. It should not be thought strange for the same or nearly the same illustrations to be used at different places, at different times by the same speaker. Contemporary speakers (including preachers) do it all the time. Besides, as noted below, the biblical use of sheep and shepherds to illustrate truth appears frequently upon the pages of inspiration. Lockyer concludes that the parable of the *Lost Sheep* in Luke ". . . must not be confused with The Parable of the Lost Sheep . . . (Matthew 18:1-14), even though the two are told in similar vein."<sup>1</sup>

Most of us have our favorite passages of Scripture. Luke Chapter Fifteen is among the chapters of the Bible that provide special encouragement to many souls whose spiritual eyes are trained on the ever approaching eternity, at which time we will meet our Great God and Creator. It is comforting to know of the emotional investment and concern God expends on each individual soul.

The fifteenth chapter of Luke is perhaps the most priceless chapter in the Bible. Certainly no chapter is more tender and more lovely. For centuries it has been called "the Gospel in the Gospels" . . .<sup>2</sup>

Luke 15 contains one parable in which there are embedded three sub-parables: the parable of the *Lost Sheep* (vv. 4-7), the parable of the *Lost Coin* (vv. 8-10) and the parable of the *Prodigal Son* (vv. 11-32) <sup>Ⓜ</sup>

Usually this renowned chapter of the Bible is broken up by writers and preachers, and dealt with as containing three precious distinct parables . . . Actually, however, the whole chapter is but one parable having three pictures. There is no break in the verses. One illustration flows into the other. So when we read, "He spake this parable unto them" (Luke 15:3), the singular form "this parable" means that the entire chapter constitutes the particular parable.<sup>3</sup>

"The three parables unite in teaching that God misses even one that is lost."<sup>4</sup> "The three parables of the fifteenth chapter of Luke illustrate God's love for sinners."<sup>5</sup> ". . . [A]s we pass from sheep and coin to son, the values also rise, and instead of one in a hundred, or one from ten, we have one out of two!"<sup>6</sup> "It was serious to lose sheep, worse to lose money, and worst of all to lose a son."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>Ⓜ</sup> For the sake of convenient class study, the first sub-parable will be examined in this chapter. The two remaining sub-parables will be treated respectively in chapters Seven and Eight.

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Together, they form the response of Jesus to his critics, the Pharisees and the scribes (Luke 15:2). The catalyst for the unfavorable review by those religious leaders was the popularity Jesus enjoyed among Israel's spiritual untouchables, namely "the publicans and sinners" (Luke 15:1-2).

This marvelous chapter had for its original audience the indignant scribes and Pharisees. They were not interested in the Kingdom themselves, yet they were angered when they saw Jesus welcome the moral outcasts and black sheep of Jewish society.<sup>8</sup>

The publicans were hateful to their countrymen, being accounted as traitors who for the sake of filthy lucre had sided with the Romans, the oppressors of the theocracy, and now collected tribute for a heathen treasury. No alms might be received from their moneychest; their evidence was not taken in courts of justice, and they were put on the same level with heathens . . .<sup>9</sup>

Sadly, the religious leaders who should have embraced the Messiah and introduced him to the masses, instead rejected him. The miserable sinners who made no pretense of being pious, though, gladly sought the Savior. "Unlike the Pharisees, the sinners knew they were sinners and needed to be saved."<sup>10</sup>

The publicans and the sinners found in Jesus One who did not reject them, but rather One who took a genuine interest in them by pointing out to them the road of salvation and life. . . . They found in Christ none of the bitter contempt to which they were accustomed from the religious authorities of their day.<sup>11</sup><sup>Pa</sup>

"Pharisees would not eat with them; Jesus looked for them."<sup>12</sup> Our efforts to reach lost souls with the Gospel need to include overtures to overt sinners, such as prostitutes, drug and alcohol addicts, the sexually immoral, prisoners, etc. We dare not restrict our evangelistic exercise to courting *polite society* and *the churched*, though they need to hear the pure Gospel, too.

"Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them" (Luke 15:1-2).

Notice how fickle mankind can be and often is! In a matter of days Jesus made his triumphant entry into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:7-11; Mark 11:7-10; Luke 19:35-40; John 12:12-19) whereupon a multitude of disciples hailed him ". . . King that cometh in the name of the Lord: peace in heaven, and glory in the highest" (Luke 19:38). The Pharisees

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<sup>Pa</sup> W. Terry Varner's treatment of the parable of the *Lost Sheep* in the Garfield Heights Church of Christ 1983 lectureship book is superb. He excels especially in the depth to which he addresses the background of the parable. I highly recommend acquisition of that volume as an invaluable complement to whatever other resources on our Lord's parables may already occupy space in your religious library.

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pined that “the world is gone after him” (John 12:19). A few days later, the multitudes cried out for our Lord’s crucifixion (Matt. 27:20-25; Mark 15:11-15). Yet, less than two months passed and about 3,000 souls mourned their part in the crucifixion of the Christ and cried out to the apostles: “. . . Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). However, at this moment in his ministry, the crowds, much to the dismay of the Pharisees and the scribes, were enamored with Jesus of Nazareth.

“All” the publicans and sinners is a synecdoche for a great many. . . .  
“Were drawing near” (imperfect verb) implies a steady stream. . . . The Pharisees and scribes murmured (imperf. — constant complaining).<sup>13</sup>

Hence, Jesus was accused of receiving and eating with sinners on an ongoing basis. Our Lord was often the target of accusations by his enemies.

They charged Jesus with (1) being a glutton (Matt. 11:18-19), (2) being a winebibber (Matt. 11:18-19), (3) casting out demons by the power of Satan (Matt. 9:34; 12:22-32), (4) being Beelzebub (Matt. 10:25; 12:26-27), (5) being a sinner (John 9:24), (6) violating the Sabbath (Matt. 12:2), (7) being a Samaritan (John 8:48), (8) possessing a devil (John 8:48), (9) deceiving the people (Matt. 27:63), (10) leading the people astray (John 7:52), (11) possessing an unclean spirit (Mark 3:30), (12) being no prophet because He came from Galilee (John 7:52), (13) being “beside himself” (Mark 3:21), (14) transgressing the traditions of the elders (Matt. 15:2), (15) perverting the nation of Israel (Luke 23:2), (16) being an evildoer (John 18:30), (17) being not from God (John 9:16), and (18) making Himself a king (Luke 23:2).<sup>14</sup>

### THE PARABLE

“And he spake this parable unto them, saying, What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance” (Luke 15:3-7).



Sheep and shepherds were common in Palestine. Consequently, biblical references to literal sheep and shepherds are abundant in Scripture. Add to these a myriad of figurative

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allusions and sheep and shepherds may be the most frequently used illustrations in the Bible.

The Bible has more to say about sheep than any other animal. There were no cats in Palestine and the dogs, generally speaking, were outcasts, though they apparently at times were used in Job's day to watch the flock (Job 30:1). Horses were few. Asses, sheep and oxen were the main domestic animals. Of the three, the sheep was far more numerous and came closest to man.<sup>15</sup>

The sheep, though, common in that part of the world, differ from the sheep that are common to other parts of the world. Also, the manner in which sheep were managed in biblical times differs from management of sheep in many places today. Sheep constituted a major portion of Bible times wealth and were economically important to both nomads and settled people. Consequently, the sheep was not disposed of carelessly, but efficiently employed for the best and fullest use, including provision for clothing, milk, food and religious animal sacrifice.

The Palestinian sheep was then and is today the so-called "broad-tailed sheep." The tails of these sheep are extremely large and weigh on an average from ten to fifteen pounds each. These sheep have always been valuable to their owners. To many of the Jews in ancient times, sheep represented their chief wealth and their sole means of livelihood. Sheep provided food to eat (1 Samuel 14:32), milk to drink (Isaiah 7:21-22), wool for the making of cloth (Job 31:20), and flesh for the offering of numerous sacrifices (Exodus 12:5, 6; 20:24; Leviticus 1:10). Because the sheep were by nature wayward and defenseless, it was necessary that they have constant supervision. In both Old and New Testaments the close relationship of God and his people is projected in the winsome figure of the shepherd and his sheep (Psalms 100:3; 23:1; Isaiah 40:11; Matthew 9:36). Thus we read of the selfless shepherd who went out searching through the hills for one stray lamb, we should remember that Jesus Christ himself is the supremely Good Shepherd who was willing to die for his sheep (John 10:1-18).<sup>16</sup>

The earliest mention of sheep is found in Genesis 4:2 where Abel is described as "a keeper of sheep." . . . We find that sheep (1) were used in the sacrificial offerings of Israel, both the adult animal (Ex. 20:24; I Kings 8:63; II Chron. 29:33) and the lamb (Ex. 29:38; Lev. 9:3; Num. 28:9; Lev. 27:27), (2) and lambs were an important source of meat (I Sam. 25:18; I Kings 1:19; 4:23; Ps. 64:11), (3) milk was an important source of drink being associated with cow's milk (Isa. 7:21, 23), (4) wool was used to produce clothing (Lev. 18:47; Deut. 22:11; Prov. 21:13; Job 31:20), (5) horns (ram) were used to make trumpets (Josh. 6:4), (6) skins (ram) were

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dyed red (Ex. 25:5) and used as a covering for the tabernacle, (7) were used as tribute by Mesha, king of Moab, to Jehoram, king of Israel (II Kings 3:4), (8) though normally were called to follow the shepherd (John 10:4; Psa. 77:20; 80:1) they were also driven (Gen. 33:13), (9) were given names as we give names to our cattle (John 10:3), (10) were at times household pets (II Sam. 12:3), and (11) each in the flock was important (Luke 15:3-7).<sup>17</sup>

The duties of the shepherd in biblical times were numerous. Additionally, the Bible times shepherd had tremendous and perpetual responsibility. His life was one of great and constant vigor.

Sheep demand constant care from the time they are born until they die. Sheep while emblems of meekness, patience, tenderness and submission (Isa. 53:7; Acts 8:32) are also the most foolish and helpless of all animals. The need for constant care and attention shows their total dependence and yearning to be under a shepherd.<sup>18</sup>

In biblical times the work of the shepherd in Judaea was difficult, hard and dangerous with scarce pasture and a tremendous responsibility to his flock. The shepherd (1) was exposed to extreme heat and cold (Gen. 31:40), (2) ate food, generally, that was produced by nature; e.g., “the fruit of the sycamore” or Egyptian fig (Amos 7:14), the “husks” of the carob-tree (Luke 15:16), (3) must protect his flock from the various wild animals, such as lions, wolves, panthers or bears (I Sam. 17:34; Isa. 31:4; Jer. 5:6; Amos 3:12), and (4) must protect his sheep from robbers (Gen. 31:39).

The biblical shepherd was supplied with various items to accomplish his work and to survive. He had (1) a mantle, probably made of sheep-skin with the fleece left on, which he turned inside-out in cold weather (Jer. 43:12), (2) a wallet or scrip which would contain a small amount of food (I Sam. 17:40), (3) a sling (I Sam. 17:40), and (4) a staff, which served a dual-purpose of (a) a weapon against his various foes and (b) a crook for management of his flock (I Sam. 17:40); Psa. 23:4; Zech. 11:7). If the shepherd tended his flock some distance from home, he had a small, light tent which apparently was easily pitched and removed (Jer. 35:7; Isa. 38:12).

The duties of the biblical shepherd are outlined in the scriptures as follows: (1) in the morning he leads his flock from the overnight fold (John 10:4), (2) he would watch the flock with dogs (Job 30:1), (3) if some strayed, he had to search for it until he found it (Ezek. 34:12; Luke 15:4), (4) he supplied them with water either from a running stream (Gen. 29:7; Psa. 23:2) or at troughs attached to or near a well (Gen. 30:38; Ex.

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2:16), (5) in the evening he would return the sheep to the fold, seeing none were missing, by passing them “under the rod” as they entered the opening of the enclosure (Lev. 27:32; Ezek. 20:37; Jer. 33:13), and (6) keeping watch at night or acting as porter (John 10:3; Gen. 31:40; Luke 2:8).<sup>19</sup>

We are indebted to W. Terry Varner especially for the interesting information above formulated by his studies regarding sheep and shepherds. The description of the sheep under consideration by Neil R. Lightfoot likewise contributes immeasurably to the understanding of the background of the parable of *the Lost Sheep*. Though lengthy, the foregoing is compelling to ensure that the contemporary student of this parable (and the other applications of sheep and shepherds throughout the biblical text) can sufficiently grasp the figure with which the spiritual lesson is communicated.

In verse four, the manner in which Jesus began the parable evidences a form of logical argumentation.

“What man of you . . .” (Lk. 15:4) This is the beginning of an *adhominem* argument — a form of refutation whereby one appeals to the opponent’s acknowledged position. Jesus frequently used such on the dishonest Jewish leaders (cf. Mt. 12:11, 12; 18:12-14).<sup>20</sup>

Generally, it was an agreeable and reasonable conduct for a shepherd to temporarily absent himself from the flock to seek a stray. By the words desert and wilderness, the Bible often refers to uninhabited areas. The 99 sheep were not in any special danger. Also, the flock should not be viewed by reason of the parable to be less important than the lost sheep. Merely, the lost sheep was the one that needed the attention of the shepherd, more so than the flock. Further, “. . . the one sheep does not indicate how few are lost, but of the Lord’s concern for a single lost soul!”<sup>21</sup>

It is interesting to draw analogies between the lost sheep and lost men. Of course, the mission of Christ pertained to lost mankind and this parable colorfully illustrates this.

A sheep is a senseless and careless animal. It wanders here and there. It is apt to go any place where there is an opening. It strays off into the distant hills and does not know the way back home. It does not know that it is lost. Multitudes of people are like this.<sup>22</sup>

The sheep, intently grazing and moving for the next bite as it grazed, simply lost its awareness of the flock, shepherd and its surroundings. Sheep do not intend to become lost, and they do not know how to find their way back to the safety of the fold. “Men become lost by wandering away from God into sin (Isa. 59:1,2).”<sup>23</sup> “The masses are lost now because they will not listen to Christ, the good shepherd. Jn. 10:14, 27.”<sup>24</sup>

. . . nibbling away at the pasture, it drifted aimlessly in the opposite direction and became separated from the shepherd and the other sheep. Such a sheep represents the stupid, foolish, unthinking kind of wanderer from God. Happily it was overtaken by the seeking shepherd and brought back to the fold.<sup>25</sup>

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“For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). “. . . I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Matt. 9:13). The religious leaders who opposed Jesus Christ should have realized this and accepted his mission. Then, they would have found no occasion to fault Jesus for his interaction with *sinners*.

Verses four through six indicate the disposition of “I *shall* find my lost sheep!” The shepherd never entertained the possibility that he would not recover the lost lamb. “The owner’s personal interest is evidenced by his going himself.”<sup>26</sup>

Verse five indicates by the gentleness with which the shepherd retrieved the lost sheep the genuine concern and devotion he had for him. “And having found his sheep, the shepherd does not punish it, nor even harshly drive it back into the fold, but he lays it upon his own shoulders and carefully carries it home.”<sup>27</sup>

The joy represented in verse six depicts the true joy that all of heaven has when a lost soul is saved. We likewise *ought* to manifest the same joy for the redemption of our fellows.

In verse seven, there is no indication that Jesus concurred with the Pharisees and scribes that they were righteous (i.e., not sinners) while the publicans and sinners only were the spiritual outcasts. Rather, “Our Lord draws His own conclusion and makes application of the parable for the reader in Luke 15:7 . . .”<sup>28</sup>

This does not imply that there are some who need no repentance; it is an ironical statement to the effect: “there is more joy over a sinner who repents than over those who need no repentance — a condition in which you Pharisees and scribes fancy yourselves to be!”<sup>29</sup>

Our Lord, for the sake of the argument in the parable, accepts their claims about themselves. They posed as “righteous” — they were not — but on their false claim, our Lord condemns them for “murmuring” against Him in His receiving and eating with sinners.<sup>30</sup>

. . . the ninety and nine the self-righteous. . . there was more real joy over one of these publicans and sinners, who were entering into the inner sanctuary of faith, than over ninety and nine of themselves, who lingered at the legal vestibule, refusing to enter.<sup>31</sup>

Neither is their reason to believe that Jesus or the angels cared more about the one lost lamb (soul) versus the flock.

5. Angels rejoice not because they care less for the ninety-nine but because — a. To be lost is terrible. b. To be saved is wonderful.<sup>32</sup>

### CONCLUSION

“God’s love of man is frequently expressed under the figure of sheep (Mt. 9:36; 10:6; Jn. 10; Heb. 13:20; 1 Pet. 2:25).”<sup>33</sup> God’s people are compared to sheep that have gone astray (Psa. 119:176; Isa. 53:6; Jer. 23:1-2; 31:10; Zech. 13:7). Employing the figure of shepherds and sheep, God chastened the leaders of Israel centuries before for their dereliction of duty toward the people. God promised to select a shepherd through whom the defunct shepherds would be punished and the scattered sheep would be recovered (Ezek. 34). Shepherds, sheep and dereliction of duty among the leaders in Israel were as current when Jesus presented this parable as when the Book of Ezekiel was received by inspiration. Jesus came to do what leaders in Israel should have done all along — “seek and save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10).

Happily, we learn from the parable of the *Lost Sheep* that despite the wandering in sin which characterizes our mortal existence, God cares and will seek us earnestly.

God’s attitude toward the lost is seen in the diligent search of the shepherd . . . It is one thing to accept sinners, it is another thing to go out and look for them.<sup>34</sup>

A. God will seek the lost. B. The Lord loves the individual. C. People wander from the Lord through neglect.<sup>35</sup>

V. The Shepherd Went To Seek for the Lost Sheep. 1. He did not rationalize. a. That the sheep’s [being] lost is not my fault. b. That it should not have wandered away. c. That it was of little value to the flock anyway. d. That after all I have ninety-nine left.<sup>36</sup>

Jesus identified himself as the Good Shepherd (John 10:11, 14-15). Peter referred to Jesus as the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet. 5:4). Otherwise, the figure of a shepherd is often cited in both testaments to describe the relationship of God and Jesus, first with physical Israel, and later with spiritual Israel (Psa. 77:20; 80:1; Isa. 40:11; Ezek. 34:14-16; 37:24). “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters” (Psa. 23:1-2). Further, the illustration of a shepherd and sheep is used to convey the responsibility of elders to the church (Acts 20:28-29; 1 Pet. 5:2-3).

Our Chief Shepherd, through combination of Jews and Gentiles through his redemptive sacrifice, has merged two sheep folds into one flock. Jesus Christ is also described in Scripture as the sacrificial lamb by which sins are remitted (John 1:29, 36; 1 Pet. 1:18-19; Isa. 53:7; Acts 8:32-35; 1 Cor. 5:7). “Jesus is pictured as the ‘Lamb of God’ some twenty-nine times in the Book of Revelation.”<sup>37</sup>

The Bible pictures the Gentiles as “sheep” not “of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd” (John 10:16). “This fold” is speaking of the world-wide, universal religion of Christianity (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Acts

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1:8) under a world-wide Shepherd and Saviour. “This fold” includes both Jew and Gentile in Christ (Eph. 2:11-22; 4:3-6), the church (Eph. 1:22-23; 2:16-22; 3:10-11; 4:3-6). “This fold,” the church, is composed of Jews and Gentiles, who have been called by the gospel . . .<sup>38</sup>

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

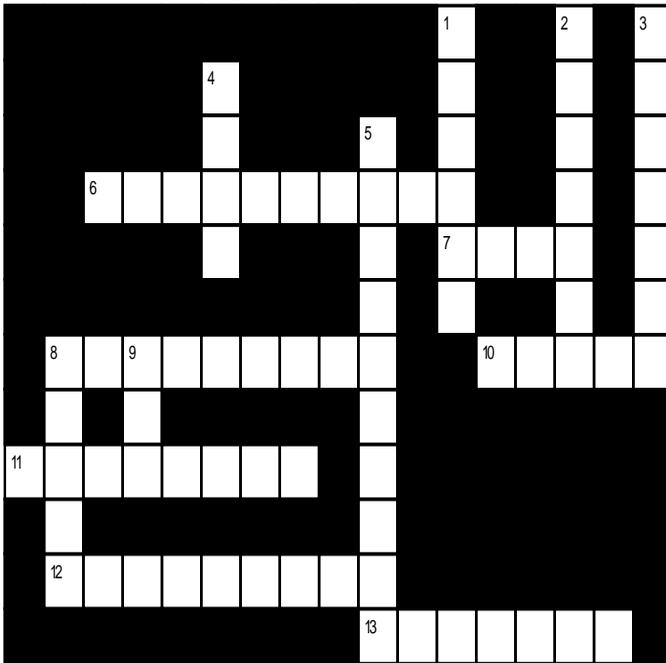
1. What was the common purpose of the parable of the *Lost Sheep* and the parables of the *Lost Coin* and the *Prodigal Son*?
2. Describe the reasons for which the religious leaders were critical of Jesus for his association with “the publicans and sinners.”
3. What ought Christians and the Lord’s church learn from the willingness of Jesus to take his message to the socially, morally and spiritually outcast in society?
4. Describe the circumstances through which Jesus rose to popular acceptance only to quickly be decried by a mob who screamed for his crucifixion and after which thousands became disciples.
5. Describe the form of argumentation Jesus used to show the Pharisees and scribes the erroneous attitude they had about others — and themselves.

### MORE QUESTIONS

1. A similar reference but different occasion to Luke’s parable of the *Lost Sheep* appears in what other Gospel record?
2. Why is Luke Chapter 15 sometimes referred to as *priceless* of “the Gospel in the Gospels”?
3. Why, technically speaking, are the three parables in Luke 15 really component parts of a single parable?
4. Name the three sub-parables that appear in Luke 15.
5. To whom was the parable of the *Lost Sheep* addressed?
6. Why were the publicans held in such low esteem by other Jews?
7. List some reasons why “the publicans and sinners” may have been receptive of Jesus’ teachings?
8. List some of the charges that were falsely made against Jesus Christ.
9. About which animal does the Bible have the most to say? Name the two other most frequently owned animals in biblical Palestine.
10. Name an animal not found in Palestine.
11. Describe Palestinian sheep.
12. List at least six things for which sheep were used in Palestine.
13. Why were shepherds so devoted to their flocks?
14. Describe several characteristics of a shepherd’s life.
15. From what predators was it necessary for shepherds to protect their flocks?
16. List the tools typically available to shepherds.
17. Describe the usual day for a shepherd.

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18. Why did the lost sheep deserve more attention than the flock? How does this part of the illustration apply to mankind?
19. In what way does the action of the shepherd in verse five console us regarding God's disposition toward sinful mankind?
20. Though Jesus did not *directly* dispute the claim of the Pharisees and scribes, describe the Lord's assessment of their spiritual condition.
21. How widely is the figure of sheep and a shepherd used in the Bible?
22. To what degree of earnest does God seek sinners?
23. List some of the rationalizations the shepherd in the parable could have made. Does the church today usually seek the lost with earnest, or does it more often rationalize to justify itself in not actively seeking lost souls?
24. How does the concept of a *shepherd* relate God the Father, Jesus Christ and elders?
25. To what does John 10:16 refer?



### The Lost Sheep

**Across**

6. In the parable, number of sheep not lost.
7. This parable is found only in this book of the Bible.
8. Sheep were used for clothing, milk, food and \_\_\_\_\_.
10. The 'good' and 'chief shepherd.'
11. Sheep 'not of this fold.'
12. Tax collectors in Palestine.
13. Jesus told this parable to the Pharisees and \_\_\_\_\_.

**Down**

1. Rejoice when a lost soul is saved.
2. 'This man receiveth \_\_\_\_\_, and eateth with them.'
3. Flocks needed protection from wild animals and \_\_\_\_\_.
4. Son of Adam who cared for sheep.
5. Uninhabited areas in the Bible are referred to as this.
8. Animal mentioned most in the Bible.
9. Domestic animal not found in Palestine.

### ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Lockyer, 283.
- <sup>2</sup> Lightfoot, II, 25.
- <sup>3</sup> Lockyer, 281.
- <sup>4</sup> Lightfoot, II, 33.
- <sup>5</sup> Roy, 64.
- <sup>6</sup> J.W. McGarvey and Philip Y. Pendleton, *Fourfold Gospel*, Cincinnati, Standard Publishing Foundation, 501.
- <sup>7</sup> Lockyer, 281.
- <sup>8</sup> Lightfoot, II, 25.
- <sup>9</sup> Trench, 133.
- <sup>10</sup> Lockyer, 283.
- <sup>11</sup> W. Terry Varner, "The Lost Sheep," *The Parables of Our Savior*, Indianapolis, Garfield Heights church of Christ, 294.
- <sup>12</sup> Jeffery Stevenson, "The Lost Coin," *The Parables of Our Savior*, Indianapolis, Garfield Heights church of Christ, 244.
- <sup>13</sup> Jackson, 40.
- <sup>14</sup> Varner, 296.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 300.
- <sup>16</sup> Lightfoot, II, 25-26.
- <sup>17</sup> Varner, 300-301.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.
- <sup>20</sup> Jackson, 41.
- <sup>21</sup> Varner, 302.
- <sup>22</sup> Lightfoot, II, 27.
- <sup>23</sup> Jackson, 41.
- <sup>24</sup> Roy, 61.
- <sup>25</sup> Lockyer, 281.
- <sup>26</sup> Jackson, 41.
- <sup>27</sup> Trench, 135.
- <sup>28</sup> Varner, 295.
- <sup>29</sup> Jackson, 42.
- <sup>30</sup> Varner, 296.
- <sup>31</sup> Trench, 136.
- <sup>32</sup> Roy, 63.
- <sup>33</sup> Jackson, 41.
- <sup>34</sup> Lightfoot, II, 29.
- <sup>35</sup> Jackson, 42.
- <sup>36</sup> Roy, 62.
- <sup>37</sup> Varner, 305.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

# Chapter 7: The Lost Coin

(Luke 15:8-10)

## INTRODUCTION

The parable of the *Lost Coin* is the second illustration of a three-part parable that was introduced in the preceding chapter. The sub-parables of the *Lost Sheep*, the *Lost Coin* and the *Prodigal Son* (or the *Lost Son*) were spoken in a single discourse by Jesus to a single audience. Together, they form the response of Jesus to his critics, the Pharisees and the scribes (Luke 15:2). The catalyst for the unfavorable review by those religious leaders was the popularity Jesus enjoyed among Israel's spiritual untouchables, namely "the publicans and sinners" (Luke 15:1-2).

. . . the basic thrust of the parable of the lost coin concerns our attitude toward the sinner, viz., the value we place on a sinner is revealed by how diligently we search for them and by how we rejoice at their conversion!<sup>1</sup>

Like Jesus Christ, the primitive church pursued sinners. Even more, the first century church (and indeed it is the same in every generation) was comprised of *sinners* (1 Cor. 6:9-11). "The church of the first century was not afraid to come in contact with sinners, teach them the gospel and welcome them into their fellowships when they repented."<sup>2</sup>

Understanding somewhat the perceived value of the lost coin and surroundings in which it was lost contribute immeasurably to the word picture to which Jesus resorted in this parable. The paragraph by Neil R. Lightfoot which follows provides that necessary insight into the parable of the *Lost Coin*.

The coin specified by Luke was a Greek drachma, which was almost the equivalent of a Roman Denarius. It was a silver coin, and although worth by our standards less than twenty cents, it was the common wage for a day's labor. Some scholars have suggested that in this case the coin was especially valuable to the woman since it formed an ornament for her head. It was customary for Jewish women to save up ten coins and string them together for a necklace or hairdress. The ornament became a treasured possession worn as the sign of a married woman, very much like a wedding band is worn today. At any rate, whether as a part of her cherished jewelry or simply as something of monetary worth, the coin was of priceless value to the woman. That is evident from her diligent search. On missing the coin, she at once lit her little oil lamp and began to sweep. A lamp was necessary for the search even in daytime, for houses then were usually built without windows and with only one door. In the house there was no wood or stone flooring, only the packed earth covered with dried reeds and rushes. With a floor like this there were many places where a coin could be lodged. All of this made the search a difficult and

trying experience and helps explain why the woman was overjoyed when she found the silver piece that had been lost.<sup>3</sup>

### THE PARABLE

“Either what woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, doth not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently till she find it? And when she hath found it, she calleth her friends and her neighbours together, saying, Rejoice with me; for I have found the piece which I had lost. Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth” (Luke 15:8-10).



Obviously, “[t]he lost coin, like the sheep of the previous parable, represents the lost sinner.”<sup>4</sup> Like the lost coin, many people are lost and are not aware that they are lost. “The soul of the sinner is ‘lost silver’ in the eyes of Jesus!”<sup>5</sup>

b. As the coin bore the image of Caesar (Lk. 20:24), so each lost sinner bears the image of his Creator (Gen. 1:26) in a spiritual sense. c. As a lost coin is of no use to its owner, the lost sinner can render no service to God. Though lost, however, it still has value and the owner wants it back. (Taylor) 3. The woman used every available means to locate the lost coin. So, God employs His Word, the workings of His Providence, faithful Christians, etc., for recovering His lost.<sup>6</sup>

“The woman’s efforts to locate the lost piece were industrious and deliberate.”<sup>7</sup> Our efforts to convert the lost should be as feverish as though we sought lost money!

The parable of the *Lost Coin* illustrates that something can be lost but literally in the house all the time. Similarly, though there are myriads of lost souls to whom we need to take the Gospel, some lost souls are in our church houses. Besides non-Christians who may be present at any time, there are usually a number of Christians who are no less inactive than is a lost coin out of circulation. “III. The Lost Coin Retained Its Value, But It Was Out of Circulation.”<sup>8</sup>

“The candle is the word of God, which the Church holds forth; and it is by this light that sinners are found . . .”<sup>9</sup> Invariably, whenever manmade doctrines or gimmicks are substituted for the Gospel light, respectively: (1) It becomes impossible to discern a sinner and often a degree of universalism results. (2) By whatever carnal bait people are drawn, only more of the same will satiate and motivate them to assemble.

It is imperative that we are able to identify the *lost*, before we can possibly show them from God’s Word how to be saved. God did not leave us without spiritual direction, whereby we can save ourselves and help others find redemption, too. The failure to evaluate ourselves, our brethren, our co-workers, neighbors, friends, acquaintances and

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family in light of God's Holy Word is a great disservice to ourselves and others, respecting eternity (2 Cor. 13:5; 1 Cor. 5:12-13; Jam. 5:19-20; Mark 16:15-16).

The sinner is lost until he is saved in Christ . . . The child of God is lost when he goes back into sin . . .<sup>10</sup>

### CONCLUSION

There are a number of lessons that we can learn from the parable of the *Lost Coin*.

A. There is a state of being lost. B. God constantly seeks the lost. C. He will employ all methods consistent with His will to recover them.<sup>11</sup>

1. The woman was very anxious about the lost coin. 2. The church should be anxious about the lost members . . .<sup>12</sup>

. . . the woman went to find the piece; she did not wait for the piece to come to her. So many of the brethren expect the lost to come to them. She also used whatever resources she had available in retrieving the coin. . . . She did not entertain the possibility of not finding it. . . . Today he continues his search using the word as a "lamp" and the church as the "broom" that sweeps the cracks and corners of the world wherein may rest lost souls. . . . Christians must believe that there are many people who will yet repent, many lost who would be found. The certainty of finding the lost coin is clear in the parable . . .<sup>13</sup>

Regrettably, the Lord's church today is often unmoved by the innumerable souls with whom we come in contact who are outside of Christ. We are comfortable ("at ease in Zion," Amos 6:1) and pleased that our families and those about whom we care the most are saved. In the rest we hardly invest a passing thought.

Does the church today rejoice when a sinner repents, or is she casual, unemotional and even ignoring? . . . The most important event of any given day is not how the stock market fared, what congress did, who won the little league pennant or how the roast turned out, but how many sinners have been found!<sup>14</sup>

It is still true, that if Christians do not faithfully practice Christianity and take the Gospel to others, then the visible church will flounder. The continued manifestation of the Lord's church on earth is dependent upon successfully teaching others the Gospel (2 Tim. 2:2).

. . . religious people who have "no time for sinful men are out of touch with God." (Donald Guthrie, *Jesus The Messiah*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan Publishing House, 1972, p. 213) There are many lost "coins" in the world. Can Jesus Christ count on his church to "light a lamp, and sweep the house, and seek diligently until she find" them? Or will the lost

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coins remain forever stolen by Satan, never to be retrieved? If we do not find them, Satan will “bank” them in hell.<sup>15</sup>

If Christians don't do it, it won't be done. Every Christian is God's mouth, hands, feet, etc., without which, by God's design, God's plan for human redemption is greatly hindered.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Explain how that, like the lost coin was in the house all the time, a soul can even amidst Christians still be lost.
2. Describe the value of a lost coin. Describe the value to God of a lost soul.
3. Why is it important to identify the lost? How can one identify lost souls?
4. Why is the Lord's church not more active, in some places, regarding seeking lost souls?
5. On what to a large extent does the visible manifestation of the church in the future depend?
6. What is the relationship between God's activity to redeem souls and Christians or the church?

### MORE QUESTIONS

1. List the three sub-parables that comprise the parabolic response of Jesus to the Pharisees and the scribes.
2. For what had the Pharisees and the scribes criticized Jesus on this occasion?
3. What is “the basic thrust” of the parable of the *Lost Coin*?
4. What affinity did the primitive first century church have with the sinners they were to convert?
5. Describe the coin that was lost.
6. Describe the surroundings in a first century home that made looking for the lost coin difficult.
7. What or whom does the lost coin represent?
8. What analogy can be made between the image on the coin and a sinner?
9. Describe the diligence with which the woman in the parable searched for the missing coin.
10. What does the candle in the parable represent?
11. What can impede this “candle” in the church today?
12. List seven lessons that can be gleaned from the parable of the *Lost Coin*.

### ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Stevenson, 242-243.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>3</sup> Lightfoot, II, 26.

<sup>4</sup> Jackson, 43.

<sup>5</sup> Stevenson, 239.

<sup>6</sup> Jackson, 43.

<sup>7</sup> Stevenson, 239.

<sup>8</sup> Roy, 64.

<sup>9</sup> Trench, 139.

<sup>10</sup> Roy, 65.

<sup>11</sup> Jackson, 43-44.

<sup>12</sup> Roy, 64.

<sup>13</sup> Stevenson, 239-240.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 244-245.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

# Chapter 8: The Prodigal Son

(Luke 15:11-32)

## INTRODUCTION

The recipients and occasion of the parable of the *Prodigal Son* are identical to that of the parables immediately preceding it — the *Lost Sheep* and the *Lost Coin*. The three parables are in a sense sub-parables of a single, multi-faceted parabolic response to our Lord's accusers.

This marvelous chapter has for its original audience the indignant scribes and Pharisees. They were not interested in the kingdom themselves, yet they angered when they saw Jesus welcome the moral outcasts and the black sheep of the Jewish society. Their antagonisms exhibited themselves in bitter criticism, and they said of Jesus, "This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them." And how did our Lord respond? He does not respond with an objection that they have misrepresented Him. Rather He concedes the truth of the charge and on the basis of it presents a touching lesson in parables as to His compassion for the lost.<sup>1</sup>

Incidentally, Scripture does not refer to this parable as the *Prodigal Son*. The word "prodigal" means "wastefully extravagant." The designation, *Lost Son*, also not applied here in Scripture, though, fits nicely with the *Lost Sheep* and the *Lost Coin* to make a thought-provoking homily. This parable appears only in the Gospel According to Luke.

## THE PARABLE

"And he said, A certain man had two sons: And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living. And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. And when he came to himself, he said,



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How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry. Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and entreated him. And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found" (Luke 15:11-32).

The younger of two sons made an inordinate petition of his father. Remarkably, his father granted the unusual request. After his father's death, the younger of two sons under Judaism would inherit one-third of the family estate. The older son received a double portion, in this case, two-thirds, when his father died. There was neither a basis for the sons to demand their inheritances while their father lived, nor a precedent by which the father was obligated to honor such an entreaty.

. . . (Deuteronomy 21:17). According to this ancient Jewish Law of Inheritance, if there were but two sons, the elder would receive two portions, the younger the third of all movable property. . . . In the parable, the younger son was thus entitled by law to his share, though he had no right to claim it during his father's lifetime.<sup>2</sup>

However, it was apparent the younger son was, as we would say, headstrong. "His mind was made up." His disposition was obvious and his inclination to leave his family was equally evident. The younger son's demand of his father and impending departure was a thoughtless insult. Still, the father, agreed to the requisition of his impudent son. The "far

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country” in verse 13, as noted by one writer, represents a spiritual far country into which sinners often go.

The far country is a state estranged from the Lord (Psa. 10:4; Eph. 2:12, 13). When one is away from God, he is in a far country!<sup>3</sup>

A life of luxury or vacation, at best, is short-lived, and one must responsibly attend to making a living. The prodigal son abandoned not only his family but the source of his livelihood and the trade in which he was doubtless trained by his father. In good times, one’s resources are quickly depleted. In depressed times, the journey to poverty is swifter. The apostle Paul taught the responsibility of the children of God to earn the physical blessings of which one and one’s family partake (2 Thess. 3:10; 1 Tim. 5:8).

The prodigal was lost through his purposeful disregard for God, for God’s righteousness and his family. He was not lost especially due to the neglect of anyone else. When the lost son found himself in deepest despair, he had only himself to blame. “The prodigal son was lost because he wanted to do as he pleased.”<sup>4</sup>

The son was lost not through his own carelessness or through the carelessness of others. He took his journey to the far country with set purpose and aforethought. He turned away from home thinking of no one but himself.<sup>5</sup>

Many people in this world seem unaware of the depths of sin into which in many instances they have plunged themselves. While myriads may be clearly aware of the degree to which they enjoy or lack *creature comforts*, far too few evaluate their spiritual bankruptcy, also. The lost boy in the parable was painfully aware of both his physical and spiritual straits. “There is hope for the sinner so long as he feels himself a miserable alien in the land of sin.”<sup>6</sup>

After wasting his fortune, he was forced to go into the fields and feed swine. Since the swine were unclean animals (Lev. 11:7), to a Jew this was the most humiliating task possible.<sup>7</sup>

The Jews listening to Jesus must have shuddered at these words, “to feed swine,” for to a Jew, there could not be a greater depth of debasement. Yielding to his baser appetites brought the prodigal so low that he felt like satisfying his hunger by eating the husks, or bean-like pods of the carob-tree, on which the swine fed.<sup>8</sup>

To defraud God of the adoration and servitude owed him as our Creator and Judge is not rational. If not solely due to love, for fear of divine retribution in a devil’s hell, especially his children should walk circumspectly. Hence, regarding verse 17, “Vincent in his Word Studies says that ‘this striking expression — came to himself — puts the state of rebellion against God as a kind of madness.’”<sup>9</sup>

The prodigal son, though, finally realized the wretched spiritual condition, besides the despicable physical surroundings and chronic hunger, in which he had thrust himself.

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Admirably, he acknowledged personal responsibility for both his sinfulness and the mistreatment of his earthly father.

For we may injure ourselves by our evil, we may wrong our neighbors, but we can sin only against God; and the recognition of our evil as first and chiefly against Him, is of the essence of all true repentance. . . . With this deep feeling of unworthiness, he will confess, I am no more worthy to be called thy son. A confession such as this belongs to the essence of all true repentance.<sup>10</sup>

The recognition that sins are primarily assaults on God, irrespective of what form and against whom on earth those sins may be directed, is intriguing. Similarly, King David responded, when confronted with the adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, “I have sinned against the Lord” (2 Sam. 12:13).

Whereas formerly, he demanded his inheritance ahead of time, later the prodigal son was disposed to humbly plead with his father to receive him back as a lowly servant. “In part two of the story he is the ideal penitent.”<sup>11</sup> However, upon returning home, his father reacted with love and grace. “The father had suffered a great injustice by his son, but he gladly received him.”<sup>12</sup> We must concur that “[t]he father, evidently watching . . .”<sup>13</sup> and therefore, the spiritual lesson that we should derive is: “. . . God’s invitation is always open.”<sup>14</sup>

The reception that the lost son received is comparable to the reception penitents can expect from Almighty God (and should receive from Christians).

The original implies that the father “covered him with kisses.” Often he had looked out along the road for this moment, and now his outgushing pity and unrestrained, overflowing manifestation of tender fatherly embrace were proofs of his unextinguished love for his lost son. How suggestive this is of God’s welcome for the penitent sinner! Once enfolded in His fatherly arms, there is no casting up of sins. God kisses the past into forgetfulness. . . . The best robe in the house meant that the son was reinstated to his original position and rights. . . . Only members of the household wore shoes — slaves were barefooted. Thus, these were the signs of the prodigal’s restoration to the standing of a son.<sup>15</sup>

Killing the “fatted calf” and the subsequent jubilant party further indicate the restoration of the lost son.

The solitary “fatted calf” had been saved for a special occasion (cf. 1 Sam. 28:24); it is a special time when one returns to God!<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately, Christians often do not express great relief and happiness over the return of fallen brethren. There is plenty of reason to rejoice over the recovery of lost souls, fallen brethren (Jam. 5:19-20) or non-Christians (Rom. 4:7-8). We must somehow imagine that our sins are less repugnant to God and perhaps *venial* compared to the *mortal sins* of others. “We should always welcome the penitent back. 1 Jn. 4:8; 2 Cor.

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2:7.”<sup>17</sup> Sometimes, Christians more easily demonstrate the sinful attitude of the older brother in the parable, rather than either the prodigal son or his loving father.

Contrary to plain and ample biblical evidence, some religious people do not believe that it is possible for a sinner to be restored. They consider one’s falling away as evidence that he was never saved in the first place. Those who fall away in sin are, by them, thought to have masqueraded as saved souls or that the fallen and those from among whom they fell were sincerely deluded. The doctrines of Calvinism, Unconditional Election and Perseverance of the Saints, notwithstanding, the Bible is replete with references to the fallen returning to God (Acts 8:22; Jam. 5:19-20; Jude 23), saints apostatizing (2 Pet. 2:20-22) and warnings not to fall — which would be nonsensical were it impossible to fall (1 Cor. 10:12). This parable is also an indication that the fallen can repent and return to God.

It refutes the doctrine that if a child of God sins he cannot come back. The prodigal son returned. Lk. 15:18-20; 1 Jn. 1:9; 2:1, 2; Acts 8:18-24.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps an odd expression to contemporary Americans, the father in the parable spoke in verses 24 and 32 of the prodigal as one who was “dead.” Obviously this stands as a figure, meaning that the father considered his son while away and in the throws of sin *as though he were dead*. In truth, one overcome in sin is spiritually dead (Rom. 6:23). Society, including the Lord’s church, hardly blushes at anything, no matter how abominable to God (Jer. 6:15). Like Eli, parents seldom restrict their offspring from whatever they devise to do (1 Sam. 3:12-13) and laws of the land sometimes interfere with discipline in the home. Some old world cultures, including Jewish, sever relationship with ostracized, non-conforming family members. In a sense, to a lesser degree, church discipline that results in withdrawal of fellowship, demands a severance of social interaction with the impenitent. However, Christians ought to earnestly desire the recovery of the sinner and rejoice with him when he returns. In short, we should duplicate the attitude displayed by the forgiving father in the parable.

Because of the son’s self-chosen alienation and shame, his father thought of him as “dead.” Perhaps his physical death would have been easier to bear.<sup>19</sup>

The sinful predicament of the elder son is both a surprise because hitherto the parable is namely about the irresponsible younger son, and because we more easily identify with the elder son. Doubtless the Pharisees and scribes were surprised, but not amused, when Jesus recited verses 25-32, and in them faulted the elder brother.

. . . Jesus meant His Pharisaic murmurers to see in the sketch He gave of this elder brother, the unloveliness of their hard, unfilial spirit . . . the portrayal of the proud, sullen, cold, self-righteous attitude of the Scribes and Pharisees in the figure of the elder brother.<sup>20</sup>

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Fortunately, God in final judgment, promises to be more nearly like the loving father in the parable than the elder son. “In some instances it may be harder to persuade some brethren to forgive than to bring some sensuous sinners to repentance.”<sup>21</sup>

So, while as one evaluates the parable, one may wonder if the prodigal son will redeem himself, but one hardly expects the turn of events where the lost son is recovered and the son at home is lost. Among other points, one, then, perceives that:

It is not necessary for one to go on a long journey in order to leave God. One can stay at home — not know his Father and not know his Father’s heart — and be lost at home as well as anywhere else.<sup>22</sup>

The father entreated his elder son, even going to him when the son would not go to the father. Though he did not seem to realize it, the elder son, as his father consoled him, already enjoyed the double-portion of his inheritance. “And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine” (Luke 10:31). More importantly, what else to be gained and for which there should be more joy, the father had received a son again and the elder brother had received his brother again. It, though, was apparently of little consolation to him that his sibling had returned to the family or to the family of God. The father in the parable, however, is further magnified and fittingly portrays the Heavenly Father through his generosity toward the elder son. “As evil as the older brother was, the Father still loved him and offered him the opportunity to come in.”<sup>23</sup>

The parable closes with the elder son stationary in his sins. The attitude of the Pharisees and scribes was identical to that of the elder brother. These religious leaders remained fixed in their disregard for the value of the souls of the sinners among whom Jesus labored, and for which cause accusations were hurled at our Lord.

9. The curtain falls with the younger son on the inside and the elder son on the outside. a. The sinners repented and accepted Christ. b. The Pharisees and scribes would not.<sup>24</sup>

Through the parable of the *Prodigal Son*, it is clear that “A wrong attitude toward others can rob us of salvation.”<sup>25</sup> This, we learn, is true regarding the elder son, the Pharisees and scribes, and you and me today — if we have so little regard for the souls of others — and greatly overestimate our own righteousness.

It is not difficult to see in the parable that the earthly father represents our Heavenly Father. The elder son depicts the Pharisees and scribes. The prodigal son portrays the publicans and sinners. With whom in the parable do you identify?

### CONCLUSION

“Broadly speaking, the parable is in three stages: the rejection of home; the return to home; the reception at home.”<sup>26</sup> Of course, at home there is the added dimension of the *second* lost son, the elder brother. Thereby, “Jesus . . . shows that there are different types of sinners and that they are lost for different reasons.”<sup>27</sup> The parable of the *Prodigal Son* begins with an assumed contrast between the sons, favorable to the elder son and

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unfavorable to the younger son. There is no less contrast between the sons by the conclusion of the parable, only their roles are reversed.

How he was saved. . . . First, self-evaluation. . . . Second, decision. . . . Third, action. . . . Fourth, confession. . . . But the confession of the humble, penitent son was cut short in the embrace of a loving father. The other son is out in the field. . . . He was self-righteous. . . . He was jealous. . . . He was heartless. He was not at all happy that his brother had come home. He would rather have his brother beaten than be forgiven. His whole outlook is one of disdain and contempt. He could not see that if his father had gained a son, he had gained a brother.<sup>28</sup>

In the main parable, of which the sub-parables of the *Lost Sheep*, the *Lost Coin* and the *Lost Son* are part, it is twice noted that there is joy in heaven over each sinner that repents. Additionally, joy is exhibited in the sub-parables after finding the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. “Only in the case of the elder brother, because he would not repent, is there no rejoicing.”<sup>29</sup>

Happily, our God desires us to be saved. “The Lord is . . . not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9). Wretched, unworthy sinners that we are, God receives humble, penitent souls. “Do we not have here the most winsome and attractive picture of a forgiving God ever drawn on earth?”<sup>30</sup>

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why did the religious critics of Jesus view him as a threat to them? Why would those religious leaders be concerned about Christ’s interest in people in whom they were not interested?
2. Why do you suppose that the father in the parable granted his younger son’s demand?
3. How do the reasons for which the sheep, coin and son were lost compare?
4. Explain the concepts of *venial* and *mortal sins* and how, though we do not subscribe to this doctrine, it may appear that we nevertheless adopt that doctrine in practice.
5. Explain the incidental teaching of the parable of the Prodigal Son as it pertains to Calvinism — namely, Unconditional Election and Perseverance of the Saints.
6. Explain the attitude of the father toward his wayward son with reference to him being “dead.”

### MORE QUESTIONS

1. List the three sub-parables found in Luke 15.
2. The parables in Luke 15 were in response to criticisms of Jesus by whom?
3. Why were these people critical of Jesus? Specifically, what charge was made against Jesus?
4. What does the word “prodigal” mean?
5. Why was it an inappropriate request for the younger son in the parable to ask for his inheritance?

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6. What does the “far country” in the parable represent?
7. Why was it impractical for the younger son to invest all of his inheritance in luxurious living?
8. Who were the responsible parties for the lost state of the prodigal son?
9. Of what deficiencies in his life did the lost son first become aware? How did his self-evaluation differ from the personal assessments most people make of themselves?
10. What is irrational about defrauding God of adoration and service?
11. Though other people may be adversely affected by one’s sins, against whom does the Bible *primarily* portray injuries because of sin?
12. Name a Bible character who, though he greatly wronged others, acknowledged that still another was primarily injured because of his sin.
13. What is learned because of the parable regarding the attitude of God toward penitent sinners?
14. List four indications that the prodigal son was received by his father and restored to his former family relationship.
15. Which son in the parable was the object of Jesus’ teaching at this time? How did this principle sneak-up on members of our Lord’s audience?
16. For whose benefit was the parable recited?
17. How did the father in the parable demonstrate graciousness toward each of his two sons?
18. Which of the two sons made use of his father’s graciousness?
19. What did the father and the elder son gained respectively?
20. The parable ends with which son being lost?
21. Who do each of these references in the parable of the *Prodigal Son* represent: the father, the younger son, the elder son?
22. Where does the happiness about which this parable speaks occur?
23. What ultimate encouragement does this parable offer to Christians regarding the Great Day of Judgment?

### The Prodigal Son Crossword Puzzle

#### Across

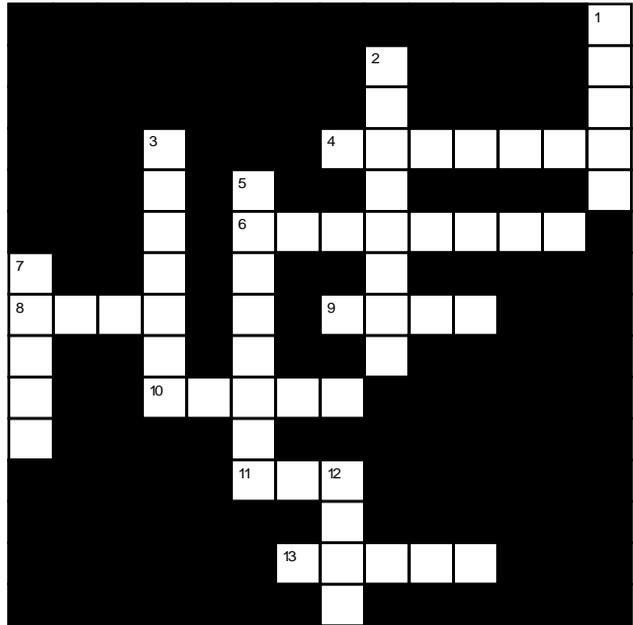
4. Son who demanded his inheritance.
6. A wrong \_\_\_\_\_ toward others can rob us of salvation.
8. This parable found only in this book.
9. Animal killed in the parable.
10. Animal mentioned in the “far country.”
11. Primarily assaulted by one’s sins.
13. “Husks” were the bean-like pods of this tree.

#### Down

1. Amount of inheritance to which the prodigal was entitled.
2. Wastefully extravagant.
3. The parable portrays different types of what?
5. The father in the parable was doing this.
7. Sinning son at the end of the parable.
12. The father said this of his wayward son.

### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Garland Elkins, "The Prodigal Son," *The Parables of Our Savior*, Indianapolis, Garfield Heights church of Christ, 123.
- <sup>2</sup> Lockyer, 286.
- <sup>3</sup> Jackson, 44.
- <sup>4</sup> Roy, 66.
- <sup>5</sup> Lightfoot, II, 28.
- <sup>6</sup> Trench, 143.
- <sup>7</sup> Elkins, 124.
- <sup>8</sup> Lockyer, 286.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup> Trench, 146-147.
- <sup>11</sup> Elkins, 125.
- <sup>12</sup> Roy, 69.
- <sup>13</sup> Jackson, 45.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.
- <sup>15</sup> Lockyer, 287.
- <sup>16</sup> Jackson, 45.
- <sup>17</sup> Roy, 69.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> Lockyer, 288.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 288-289.
- <sup>21</sup> Elkins, 125.
- <sup>22</sup> Lightfoot, II, 33.
- <sup>23</sup> Jackson, 46.
- <sup>24</sup> Roy, 70.
- <sup>25</sup> Jackson, 46.
- <sup>26</sup> Lockyer, 286.
- <sup>27</sup> Elkins, 122.
- <sup>28</sup> Lightfoot, II, 31-32.
- <sup>29</sup> Elkins, 122.
- <sup>30</sup> Lockyer, 289.



# Chapter 9: The Unjust Steward

(Luke 16:1-13)

## INTRODUCTION

Jesus continued his discourses on the heels of the three-fold parable found in Luke 15 (the *Lost Sheep*, 3-7; the *Lost Coins*, 8-10; the *Lost Sons* or the *Prodigal Son*, 11-32). Luke 15:1 records that especially the publicans and sinners came nearer to Jesus as he spoke. Also present in the crowd were Pharisees and scribes who complained that Jesus ate with publicans and sinners and otherwise associated with Jewish outcasts. The three parables in Luke 15 comprised our Lord's response to the self-righteous Pharisees and scribes and exhibited a tender love for the misguided masses.

Luke 16 opens with Jesus especially speaking to his many disciples in the audience. The Pharisees, though, were also present and criticized the Son of God following the parable of the *Unjust Steward*. "And the Pharisees also, who were covetous, heard all these things: and they derided him" (Luke 16:14). In this parable, the Christ addressed responsibilities and accountability in the kingdom of God.

## THE PARABLE

"And he said also unto his disciples, There was a certain rich man, which had a steward; and the same was accused unto him that he had wasted his goods. And he called him, and said unto him, How is it that I hear this of thee? give an account of thy stewardship; for thou mayest be no longer steward. Then the steward said within himself, What shall I do? for my lord taketh away from me the stewardship: I cannot dig; to beg I am ashamed. I am resolved what to do, that, when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses. So he called every one of his lord's debtors unto him, and said unto the first, How much owest thou unto my lord? And he said, An hundred measures of oil. And he said unto him, Take thy bill, and sit down quickly, and write fifty. Then said he to another, And how much owest thou? And he said, An hundred measures of wheat. And he said unto him, Take thy bill, and write fourscore. And the lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely: for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light. And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations. He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much. If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? And if ye have not been faithful in that which is another man's, who shall give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the

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one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Luke 16:1-13).

The parable of the *Unjust Steward* is found only in Luke. We are the beneficiaries of several parables that are found exclusively in the *Gospel According to Luke* (the *Two Debtors*, 7:41-50; the *Good Samaritan*, 10:25-37; the *Rich Fool*, 12:16-21; the *Barren Fig Tree*, 13:6-9; the *Wedding Guest*, 14:7-11; the *Great Supper*, 14:15-24; *Counting the Cost*, 14:25-35; the *Lost Sheep*, 15:1-7; the *Lost Coins*, 15:8-10; the *Prodigal Son*, 15:11-32; the *Unjust Steward*, 16:1-13; the *Rich Man and Lazarus*, 16:19-31; the *Unprofitable Servant*, 17:1-10; the *Unjust Judge*, 18:1-8; the *Pharisees and Publicans*, 18:9-14; the *Pounds*, 19:11-28). Together, the parables of our Lord greatly assist mankind in understanding the will of God for us. The illustrations thus employed through these parables also often emphasize and immortalize biblical truth that is otherwise recorded upon the pages of inspiration.

Regarding the parable before us, it is first necessary to adequately identify what is meant in the Bible by referring to a “steward.” The steward, of course, is the chief character in this illustration. Simply stated, “[a] steward is one who has been put in charge of another’s possessions.”<sup>1</sup> In Genesis 39, Joseph served in the capacity of a steward. After Joseph’s brothers sold him to slave traders, Joseph was bought by an Egyptian named Potiphar.

“And Joseph found grace in his [Potiphar’s] sight, and he served him: and he made him overseer over his house, and all that he had he put into his hand. And it came to pass from the time that he had made him overseer in his house, and over all that he had, that the Lord blessed the Egyptian’s house for Joseph’s sake; and the blessing of the Lord was upon all that he had in the house, and in the field. And **he left all that he had in Joseph’s hand; and he knew not ought he had, save the bread which he did eat.** And Joseph was a goodly person, and well favoured” (Gen. 39:4-6).  
[emphasis added, ler]

God wants all of his children to act as stewards. “And the Lord said, Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his lord shall make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of meat in due season?” (Luke 12:42). In Luke 12:42-48, among other points, stewards in Bible times were over other servants and exercised great responsibility. Further, Jesus advised his close disciples in this context that the children of God were to ever guard their stewardships from inactivity and abuse. There is no question that we as stewards of God will be held accountable for our stewardship in the final Judgment (Matt. 25:34-40). “. . . stewardship involves not only responsibility and privilege, but it also involves accountability.”<sup>2</sup>

Even Christians tend to forget that nothing we may possess belongs to us. Everything and our very souls belong to God (Psa. 50:10-11; Ezek. 18:4); we are merely *stewards* of those things with which we may be blessed.

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a. The wealth of the world belongs to God. Psa. 24:1. b. The wealth of the world is committed to us as a stewardship.<sup>3</sup>

Earthly wealth does not belong to us; it is merely loaned and we must demonstrate our responsibility as good stewards.<sup>4</sup>

Stewardship has to do with how a believer uses everything he possesses, and not just his money. We are to be good stewards in the way we use our cars, our tools, our houses, our clothing — everything that we have. Stewardship does not mean giving 10 percent to God and then wasting the remaining 90 percent. It means using the 100 percent wholly for the Lord as He directs.<sup>5</sup>

Christians are stewards of a number of things, including: material wealth, abilities, time, the Gospel and our souls. Parents, for instance, are also stewards of the precious souls of their children. Owing to the influence each of us wield, we are certainly stewards of other souls with whom we come in contact. The smallest item in the inventory at our disposal, even a cup of water, requires our faithful stewardship. “And whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward” (Matt. 10:42).

The steward in the parable was an **unfaithful steward**. “There is not the slightest ground for supposing that the steward was falsely accused.”<sup>6</sup> “Somewhere along the line the steward had proved himself unworthy of the trust placed in him.”<sup>7</sup>

. . . this man had his master’s wealth in his control and was supposed to manage it for his mater’s good. . . . you do not own anything? You may possess many things, but you do not own them. God owns them. He is the Master and we are the stewards. He gives us the privilege of using His vast wealth, and He gives us the responsibility of using it faithfully.<sup>8</sup>

In 1 Corinthians 4:1-2, the apostle Paul specifically applied stewardship to preaching the Gospel. Of course, stewardship does not apply only to preaching, but we want to note in the following passage that stewardship does involve being “found faithful.”

“Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful” (1 Cor. 4:1-2).

In the other parables studied thus far, great care was given to indicate who the various characters may represent. Immediately in Luke 16 the reader is introduced to a rich man and his steward. Later, other nameless characters are introduced, also — the rich man’s debtors. However, there may not be any persons in particular that are especially represented by these characters.

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But the steward, the rich man, and the debtors stand for no one in particular. The parable seeks to convey one central truth, and all details of the parable must be understood in light of that truth.<sup>9</sup>

We have already introduced what a steward is supposed to be. Moreover, in paragraphs above, the steward in the parable of the *Unjust Steward* has been depicted as culpable for corruption in his role as such. As the parable largely revolves around this character, naturally more will follow concerning him. The rich man, though, appears first in the chapter. He appears to be an honorable merchant operating within his rights as the owner and proprietor when he challenged his steward's conduct. We must remember that simply being *rich* is not sinful, though it presents some special temptations.

“But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows” (1 Tim. 6:9-10).

Rich men about whom one can read in the Bible who were also faithful children of God include Abraham and Job.

The *Unjust Steward* knew that he had been caught. He realized that it was merely a matter of days before he would be unemployed. Not only so, but the disgrace of being fired for being an unfaithful steward could well preclude other gainful employment. The options that he imagined were for him unthinkable. “Then the steward said within himself, What shall I do? for my lord taketh away from me the stewardship: I cannot dig; to beg I am ashamed” (Luke 16:3).

Suddenly, the crooked steward had a brainstorm! As we might say, he decided to “feather his nest.”<sup>10</sup> He resolved to ingratiate his master's debtors to himself. Then, having no job or source of livelihood he would impose on the hospitality of those businessmen (Luke 16:4). The steward determined to accomplish his scheme through fraud and counted on the debtors to be willing accomplices, to which they readily agreed (verses 5-7).

A modern businessman can certainly identify with the elements in this parable! Dishonest employees, kickbacks, price-fixing — they have always been a part of business and probably always will be.<sup>11</sup>

Incidentally, the measurements of the commodities involved in the transactions (verses 6-7) were equivalent to the following volumes with which we are more familiar.

C. He thus called the creditors [debtors, *ler*] in. The first had his debt reduced by 50%; the second had his reduced by 20%. 1. The first debtor owed 100 measures of oil — 800 gallons, the yield of 146 olive trees worth about 1,000 denaria or \$170 (a large amount since a daily wage for a working man was only 1 denarius — Mt. 20:2). 2. The second owed 100

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measures of wheat — the yield of about 100 acres and worth 2,500 denaria or \$425. This was reduced to 80 measures.<sup>12</sup>

The measure mentioned was a bath, an amount equal to about five and a half American gallons. The measure here was a cor, equal to about five bushels.<sup>13</sup>

“We may suppose that the rich man had sold, through his steward, a portion of his farm products to these debtors, on credit.”<sup>14</sup>

Remarkably, the rich man commended his wicked steward (verse 8). The basis of the commendation was not the fraud, but the ingenuity with which the steward extricated himself from the consequences of his crimes. The principle of wisdom and not any defective conduct is also the emphasis of the our Lord’s parable. “Christ did not commend the cunning deceit, but the astuteness of this steward.”<sup>15</sup>

He was commended by his master, not because of his dishonesty, but because of the wisdom he had used in preparing for the future. . . . we are not going to be on this earth forever, and we must use foresight in planning for our eternal future.<sup>16</sup>

His plan was a simple one: by falsifying the records he figured to gain the gratitude of the debtors, so that when he was let out of his job he would be repaid by the hospitality of his friends. When his master learned of the plot, instead of burning with anger, he shrugged his shoulders and with a cynical grin commended the steward for his sharp practice. So all the characters in the story were rogues and rascals. The steward was dishonest; he had been systematically stealing from his master, and even after being caught continued to lie and steal his way out. The debtors were, of course, dishonest; they immediately seized the opportunity to take advantage of their creditor and registered their names on fictitious entries. The master also was a worldly rascal, a man who was able to appreciate a shifty bit of work even when directed against himself.<sup>17</sup>

Like the parable of the *Unjust Judge*, where the judge represents God, this parable on the surface may appear counterproductive to Christian principles. This parable can be easily misconstrued to praise the unlawful and sinful activity rather than the diligence and urgency with which the steward acted. In the parable of the *Unjust Judge*, God in place of the judge is the recipient of persistent prayer, which unlike the judge in the parable, God responds quickly and gladly. “In the text for this study, our Lord is giving a great lesson, and yet one that has been a source of controversy down through the years.”<sup>18</sup>

The notion of appealing to an illustration, such as in this parable, whereby evil ventures are used as a frame of reference for godly conduct is paradoxical. In verse eight, the rich man in the parable attributes a degree of worldly wisdom to the clever steward. Sometimes elsewhere in the inspired record Jesus also referred to what at first seem to be

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unlikely comparisons to teach heavenly truths. “Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves” (Matt. 10:16). Ordinarily, for instance, we do not think of the virtues of snakes. Further, we can barely imagine a correlation between characteristics of “serpents” and “doves,” which creatures are hardly friends.

The latter half of verse eight carries the heart of the message to be learned from this parable. “. . . for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light.” Not the evil that was done in the parable, but the diligence and enthusiasm are urged upon the children of God. “In our Lord’s application of the parable to His disciples, He told them to learn a lesson from the prudence and foresight often exercised by successful men of the world.”<sup>19</sup>

. . . children of the world, those whose hopes are centered in material goods, have more energy and foresight in the exercise of their material concerns than Christians have in the practice of Christianity. . . The steward bent every effort to provide for his future welfare; the debtors hastened to join in with the scheme of a crafty thief; and the master was ready to wink at their dishonesty. If Christians were as diligent and resourceful in kingdom business as business men are in worldly business, what a marvelously different world it would be.<sup>20</sup>

Luke 16:8 — “How true this is! We who are children of God (children of light) do not use as much wisdom in obtaining what we desire (a home in heaven) as children of this world use in getting what they want (the things of this life). They use far more wisdom in the physical realm than we do in the spiritual.”<sup>21</sup>

Verse eight also contrasts the accountable inhabitants of this world in two possible camps. Besides souls who have never been accountable for themselves, there are only two spiritual dispositions of mankind represented in the Bible to be available on earth or in eternity. The proverbial *middle of the road*, *gray area*, *fence-sitting neutral*, *purgatory* and *limbo* are non-existent.

The children of this world evidently means those who look not beyond this earth, being born of the spirit of the world and not of God. The phrase occurs but once else in Scripture (Luke xx. 34); though the term “children of light” may be found John xii. 36; 1 Thess. v.5; Eph. v.8.<sup>22</sup>

A casual reading of verse nine appears to present an implausible instruction by Jesus Christ. “And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations.” “The word ‘mammon’ is an Aramaic word which means ‘money’ or ‘wealth.’”<sup>23</sup> Money itself, though, does not sin, but money is frequently used in sinful activities, obtained through sinful activities or people entertain sinful affections toward it. “Money is called unrighteous mammon because it is generally used for evil ends (Cf. “filthy lucre” 1 Tim.

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3:8).”<sup>24</sup> “Mammon of unrighteousness” is comparable to the temporal wealth at our disposal owing to our stewardship. God’s faithful children are called upon to properly utilize these resources in preparation for anticipated heavenly habitations. The temporary, earthly riches are contrasted with the eternal and heavenly treasures.

“Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6:19-21).

Also in verse nine, there is an obvious allusion to the inevitable death all mankind faces, prepared or not (unless Jesus were to return first). “The words that when ye fail, are, of course, equivalent to that when ye die.”<sup>25</sup>

Luke verses 10-12 continue to prod disciples of Christ to practice good stewardship with respect to earthly resources in preparation for eternal habitations, for which every child of God longs. “Christ thus admonishes the disciples to use their material means to accomplish good that they might reap eternal benefits.”<sup>26</sup>

Verse 13 succinctly contrasts two life’s goals which stand at poles apart with no middle ground. The only legitimate use of material blessings with which we have been entrusted pertains to a use that yields, through preparation made, a home in heaven with God. Just as it was impossible for slaves to serve more than one master at the same time, Christians can no more serve themselves with this world’s wealth and successfully seek the favor of God, here and eternally. “No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Luke 16:13).

In Biblical times no slave could serve two masters. A slave was owned absolutely by his lord . . . So the Christian cannot serve God in a part-time capacity. God and mammon are uncompromising opposites.<sup>27</sup>

Immediately following the parable of the *Unjust Steward*, the Pharisees chided Jesus for the parable. Our Lord knew, though, the motives for which they reacted as they did, which knowing before, enabled Jesus to address their needs, even as he spoke primarily to his disciples. “And the Pharisees also, who were covetous, heard all these things: and they derided him” (Luke 16:14). “That the parable stung the conscience of the money-loving Pharisees is evident from their reaction to it.”<sup>28</sup>

### CONCLUSION

In Luke 16, “Jesus continues his discourse to his disciples in the presence of the Pharisees, publicans, and sinners.”<sup>29</sup> “The basic design of the narrative is to warn against the love of money with special emphasis on using one’s material things in preparation for eternity.”<sup>30</sup>

He told this parable to His disciples, but the Pharisees were listening (v. 14). The Lord wanted to teach two important lessons: (1) the wise use of

opportunities, and (2) the danger of covetousness. If believers would make as wise decisions as businessmen do — but with the right motives — they would accomplish more for the kingdom of God. When this steward discovered he was facing a crisis (the boss was auditing the books), and would certainly lose his position, he made the wisest use of the situation and prepared for the future. . . . The Lord Jesus did not commend this steward for his unethical actions. He commended him for his wise use of his opportunities.<sup>31</sup>

The simplest explanation of such a parable is that Jesus used it to describe worldly astuteness, and to teach a lesson of spiritual prudence. . . . It must not be forgotten that it was not Jesus who commended the steward's fraudulent act, but the lord mentioned in the parable.<sup>32</sup>

It truly is astounding, though, that probably each of us fails to fully appreciate the intensity with which we should pursue heavenly habitations. Only with great difficulty sometimes do the children of God, with the mind's eye, clearly envision the heavenly horizon. However, we must arise above the mundane and often profane existence to which mortals are accustomed, to earnestly grasp things intangible and eternal. It is a difficult lesson, but we must learn that greater, heavenly heights are achieved, in part, by the proper use and not abuse of earthly resources.

If they ["the children of this world"] are so eager about uncertain riches, why aren't you more enthusiastic about the true values? The children of the world are more prudent than the children of light.<sup>33</sup>

With this parable, Jesus teaches that, "[m]en of the world often act with more forethought with respect to worldly affairs than the children of God do with respect to spiritual affairs."<sup>34</sup> We must convince ourselves, "If Christians really believe they will one day give an accounting to God, this conviction will show up in their lives — in their use of time, talents, and treasures."<sup>35</sup>

One should not conclude from the parable of the *Unjust Steward* that he ought to embrace some sort of *situational ethics*, whereby evil may be committed to effect good. Instead, Christians should be impressed with and pledge to live by principles of divine stewardship. Do you have a car? It is the Lord's car that you drive. Do you have a home? It is God's home in which you live. Do you possess a television, a VCR, a radio, a computer, a couch, a bed, a bank account, a clock, clothes, toys, a lawnmower, and such like? Do you possess an aptitude or a skill for a trade, a hobby, an avocation, etc.? Do you have knowledge, experience or confidence? Do you have a mouth, eyes, ears, feet, hands? Do you have time, influence, opportunity? Whatever, from the tangible to the intangible, we may be able to command, is not solely for our own use and enjoyment. As the stewards of God, we are entrusted with the possessions of the Almighty God of the Universe, our Creator and Judge.

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As the steward was summoned in, so the Christian will be summoned to render account of his stewardship. One last audit awaits every Christian.<sup>36</sup>

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do parables contribute to a greater understanding of God's Word?
2. From Genesis 39, describe the extent to which a steward was responsible for one's estate.
3. Describe the concept of mankind's stewardship to God.
4. Discuss what special temptations may buffet those who are rich.
5. Why may have the *Unjust Steward's* future job prospects been limited?
6. In what ways is this parable more difficult to understand than our Lord's other parables?
7. Explain the primary lesson that Jesus taught in the parable of the *Unjust Steward*.
8. Define "mammon of unrighteousness." In what ways are Christians to make "friends of the mammon of unrighteousness"?
9. What are legitimate uses for the resources with God has entrusted us as his stewards?
10. What should Christians learn from observing the eagerness with which worldly souls seek the material resources of this world?

### MORE QUESTIONS

1. What occasion immediately preceded the presentation of the parable of the *Unjust Steward*?
2. To whom especially did Jesus speak this parable?
3. Name the various groups represented in the audience to whom Jesus presented the parable of the *Unjust Steward*.
4. Where besides the *Gospel According to Luke* is this parable found?
5. List the parables that are only found in Luke.
6. Briefly, define the word "steward" as it is used in the Bible.
7. Name a famous Old Testament patriarch who was a steward for an Egyptian.
8. Identify who each of the characters in this parable represents.
9. Name two Old Testament characters (mentioned in this chapter) who were rich and yet faithful to God.
10. How did the steward in the parable know that he was about to lose his job?
11. Explain the steward's plan for his future welfare?
12. How much money was lost to the rich man through the fraud of his steward in just two of his final transactions?
13. Why did the rich man commend his unfaithful steward?
14. Identify the corrupt persons in this parable.
15. Name another of Christ's parables that refers to a corrupt circumstance to illustrate a spiritual truth.
16. How many categories of accountable souls are on earth? How many categories of accountable souls are in eternity?
17. What do the phrases "children of this world" and "children of light" mean?

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18. What does the word “mammon” mean?
19. To what does the phrase “when ye fail” refer?
20. Explain the phrase “Ye cannot serve God and mammon.”
21. Why were the Pharisees critical of the presentation of the parable of the *Unjust Steward* by Jesus?
22. What is taught about situational ethics in this parable?
23. List the possessions that Christians may possess that belong to God and should be used in such a way to serve the interests of Almighty God.
24. What ominous occasion awaits every steward of God?

### ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Virgil Hale, “The Unrighteous Steward,” *The Parables of Our Savior*, Indianapolis, Garfield Heights church of Christ, 111.
- <sup>2</sup> Wiersbe, 83.
- <sup>3</sup> Roy, 71.
- <sup>4</sup> Jackson, 78.
- <sup>5</sup> Wiersbe, 81.
- <sup>6</sup> Trench, 153.
- <sup>7</sup> Hale, 111.
- <sup>8</sup> Wiersbe, 79.
- <sup>9</sup> Lightfoot, II, 36.
- <sup>10</sup> Hale, 113.
- <sup>11</sup> Wiersbe, 78.
- <sup>12</sup> Jackson, 77.
- <sup>13</sup> Lightfoot, II, 35 (footnotes).
- <sup>14</sup> Trench, 154.
- <sup>15</sup> Lockyer, 290.
- <sup>16</sup> Hale, 114.
- <sup>17</sup> Lightfoot, II, 35-36.
- <sup>18</sup> Hale, 111.
- <sup>19</sup> Lockyer, 291.
- <sup>20</sup> Lightfoot, II, 37-38.
- <sup>21</sup> Hale, 113.
- <sup>22</sup> Trench, 157.
- <sup>23</sup> Lightfoot, II, 36.
- <sup>24</sup> Jackson, 77.
- <sup>25</sup> Trench, 159.
- <sup>26</sup> Jackson, 77.
- <sup>27</sup> Lightfoot, II, 40.
- <sup>28</sup> Lockyer, 290.
- <sup>29</sup> Roy, 71.
- <sup>30</sup> Jackson, 76.
- <sup>31</sup> Wiersbe, 78.
- <sup>32</sup> Lockyer, 290-291.
- <sup>33</sup> Lightfoot, II, 38.
- <sup>34</sup> Roy, 71.
- <sup>35</sup> Wiersbe, 83.
- <sup>36</sup> Lightfoot, II, 40.

# Chapter 10: The Rich Man and Lazarus

(Luke 16:19-31)

## INTRODUCTION

Writers and preachers debate whether the narrative of *The Rich Man and Lazarus*, found exclusively in the *Gospel According to Luke*, is a parable. Lockyer, in his popular book on parables, enumerates about 70 parables of Jesus, including *The Rich Man and Lazarus*. Others, especially those who estimate that our Lord presented about 30 to 35 parables, do not include this account in their discussions of the parables of Jesus.

The minor conflict on how to classify this discourse is inconsequential. Irrespective of whether Jesus' words here are parabolic, historical or illustrative, we can be assured that Jesus taught the truth. Further, there are biblical principles and otherwise unavailable information from beyond the grave in which we can delight. Some students of the Luke 16:19-31 context attempt to minimize the glimpse beyond the grave here by summarily resigning it to *parable status*, as though if a parable, then somehow the information is not dependable.

If Luke 16:19-31 is a parable, it is largely unlike the parables of our Lord in several areas. Ordinarily, parables are *earthly stories with heavenly meanings*. Jesus frequently drew upon the circumstances with which men were abundantly familiar to teach them spiritual truths about which they knew little or nothing. However, regarding the sequence of events on the other side of the threshold of death, mankind knows nothing through personal experience. Also, our Lord's other parables do not use proper names or refer to specific individuals ("a certain rich man," Luke 16:19; "Lazarus," Luke 16:20). "It is associated with real characters. (1). Abraham. (2). Lazarus. (3). A certain rich man."<sup>1</sup>

There are some writers who do not regard this narrative, peculiar to Luke, as a parable. Their contention is that it is not called a "parable" and that names are introduced. In all other parables of our Lord names are never given.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, had Jesus declared that his speech were a parable (which he did not here) there would be no controversy.

*The Rich Man and Lazarus*, though, was a story among several stories (parables) that Jesus presented on one occasion. By stories, there is no intention to diminish the impact and truthfulness of the parables of Jesus. These stories, including *The Rich Man and Lazarus*, were vehicles through which Jesus conveyed important and divine truth.

Overall, Jesus has for an audience those to whom he spoke the preceding parables of the *Lost Sheep*, the *Lost Coin*, the *Prodigal Son*, and the *Unjust Steward*. Present were our Lord's disciples (Luke 16:1; 17:1), Pharisees, scribes, publicans and sinners (Luke 15:1-2; 16:14). At different times Jesus addressed certain ones in his audience, though

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the others were present also and listening. “. . . [T]he story of the rich man and Lazarus stands in a series of parables that reaches from Luke 14 through chapter 18.”<sup>3</sup>

The basic thrust of the *Rich Man and Lazarus* concerns the godly deployment of the resources with which especially rich men have been entrusted by God. “1. The story of the rich man and Lazarus was given as: a. A lesson on the proper use of riches. Luke 16:13. b. A reply to the scoffing of the covetous Pharisees. Lk. 16:14-15.”<sup>4</sup>

Jesus relates the story of the rich man and Lazarus in three scenes. There is, first, a brief picture of the two men as they lived on earth. . . . The second scene is of the two men in death. . . . The third scene reveals the fate of the two men after death.<sup>5</sup>

### THE PARABLE

“There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores, And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham’s bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried;



And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame. But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented. And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence. Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father’s house: For I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment. Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent. And

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he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead” (Luke 16:19-31).

The two principle characters whose lives and eternal dispositions are contrasted appear in verses 19-20. The rich man was unnamed whereas the beggar’s name was cited — the opposite of typical circumstances among mortals. Sometimes this parable is called *The Dives and Lazarus*. “. . . Dives, which is the Latin term for ‘rich man.’”<sup>6</sup> “Lazarus was a common name, being the Greek form for the Hebrew name Eleazar.”<sup>7</sup> “Lazarus means, ‘God has helped,’ or ‘God is the helper.’”<sup>8</sup>

The significance of *purple* in the Bible relates to wealth or royalty (which has command of rich resources). “The extreme costliness of the purple dye of antiquity is well known; it was accounted, too, the royal color, and the purple garment was then, as now in the East, a royal gift (Esth. viii. 15; Dan. v. 7).”<sup>9</sup> A purple robe was placed on Jesus by the soldiers who mocked him as King (Mark 15:17-20). Lydia in Acts 16:14 was “a seller of purple.”

To some extent, as circumstances permit, men have control over their own lives while living upon the earth. Death, though, is an appointment that no one will be able to avoid (unless Jesus returns before we die, 1 Thess. 4:13-18). Death, otherwise, will visit each of us (Heb. 9:27). We are indebted to Jesus for revealing the abode of departed spirits between death and the great, final judgment.

Having come from eternity there was no one more competent than the Eternal Son to draw aside the veil which separates this present world from the unseen. With divine knowledge, He could speak with authority of the life to come.<sup>10</sup>

Both of the characters to whom we have been introduced so far in this parable died. “The two men Jesus portrayed were as opposite in death as they had been in life.”<sup>11</sup> The circumstances familiar to each in life doubtless also characterized the respective disposition of their lifeless bodies. Regarding the rich man, “. . . we may infer that he had a splendid funeral; this splendid carrying to the grave is for him what the carrying into Abraham’s bosom was for Lazarus . . .”<sup>12</sup>

But with the rich man it was different. He died, as all must die, whether rich or poor, but he “was buried,” and doubtless had a stately burial, with hired mourners and all the pageantry of woe, the rich could afford. Yet though his body was conveyed to an ornate tomb with all due honors, his soul on departing from earth was solitary. No angelic convoy appeared to escort him to the regions of the blest.<sup>13</sup>

The contrasts between the two men that were evident during their respective lives continued to distinguish between them regarding their funerals (if Lazarus’ body was the beneficiary even a cursory ceremony).

3. At death Lazarus had no impressive burial. 4. At death the rich man was buried perhaps with great honors and ceremonies. 5. At death the two men

did not cease existence. 6. At death each man was conscious and rational.<sup>14</sup>

Lockyer quotes another commentator, regarding the likely disposition of the dead body of Lazarus:

Almost inevitably the cleaners passed the dead body, unknown, unclean, and hurried it away in the early dawn until they came to Tophet, Gehenna, the rubbish and refuse heap of fire, where they flung the body in. That is a known fact of the time, and the very fact we are not told Lazarus was buried, leads us to suppose such an end for him.<sup>15</sup>

On the far side of the threshold of death, the souls of the rich man and Lazarus are depicted by the passage to be in a place for departed spirits, which itself is divided respectively to receive lost souls and saved souls. Clearly, in this life and beyond, there are merely two spiritual conditions for all accountable souls. On earth we each are members either of the kingdom of darkness or the kingdom of light (Col. 1:13; 1 Pet. 2:9). After death, we are residents of Tartarus or Paradise (Luke 23:43) — the two divisions of the hadean realm. Following the great judgment, there will be only two eternal dispositions of souls — hell or heaven. **There is no *spiritual middle ground* for accountable souls in this life, after death or in eternity!** After death, “[t]he division of the good and bad is absolutely fixed and permanent.”<sup>16</sup>

The incomparable comfort afforded departed saints, perhaps, has been largely overlooked and underestimated. Yet, this is a significant difference between the anxious journey of souls approaching certain death for the Christian versus the unprepared. The pain and the fear of the unknown regarding death are bearable, mindful of divine promises and the anticipated escort of angels (verse 22). “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me” (Psa. 23:4).

It is the state of painless expectation intervening between the death of Christians, and their perfect bliss at the Saviour’s coming in His Kingdom. It is the “Paradise” of Luke xxiii. 43 . . .<sup>17</sup>

Death is generally an involuntary experience, often for which mankind makes little or no preparation, beyond perhaps arranging for the disposition of one’s earthly body. Death, though, changes everything with which we are familiar in this physical world.

Now it is true that death changes many things. At death we are severed from all things material. Our monetary gains, our treasures, all of our possessions are wrenched from our hands. Our earthly houses are dissolved. Our bodies return to indistinguishable forms of dust. Everything that is physical perishes. But death cannot change personality. The individual self lives on.<sup>18</sup>

## Chapter 10: The Rich Man and Lazarus

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Frank reality for the rich man in this parable was that he was judged to be unrighteous, the consequence of which was an eternal separation from the righteous and from the Godhead. He woke from the slumber of death on one side of the grave to find himself in a place where he was forced to endure a foretaste of fiery, eternal hell. He was not, however, yet in hell itself.

As far as can be ascertained from the text, the rich man, though lost in eternity, was not in life a criminal or notoriously evil — by the standards of men. “. . . [H]e is not accused of any breach of the law . . .”<sup>19</sup> Yet, it was clear that his eternal disposition was assured to be lost in hell permanently. That should frighten almost anyone who reads this study book! Compared to the rest of the world, you and I are comparable in our resources to the rich man. “There is nothing to make us think of him as other than a reputable man, — one who desired to remove from himself all things painful to the flesh, to surround himself with all things pleasurable.”<sup>20</sup> We have the identical responsibilities he did, for which we will be held accountable. Like the rich man, we can only make preparation for eternity **this side of the grave**.

2. The rich man was not accused of being unscrupulous in getting his riches. 3. The rich man did not use his riches properly. . . . Jam. 4:17.<sup>21</sup>

James 4:17 acquaints the reader with the *sin of omission*. Unlike *sins of commission* which godly souls more easily recognize and typically avoid, failing to do what we can do in the service of God, including helping our fellow man, is **also sin** (Matt. 25:31-46). The wages of sin (all kinds) is spiritual death (Rom. 6:23). “The choice made on earth determines the life to come, and such a choice is final.”<sup>22</sup>

In the parable the rich man is irrevocably consigned to the place of torment. What wrongs were in his life? Why was he condemned? He was not condemned simply because he was rich or because he lived in a fine house. Not all rich people are censured by the Lord, for Abraham was rich. Nor was the rich man condemned because of any outright wickedness. He was not a violent man. He was not deliberately cruel to Lazarus. He did not drive him away from his gates, or slap him in the face as he passed him by. What, then, were the sins of the rich man? 1. He was indifferent. . . . 2. He was selfish.<sup>23</sup>

“. . . Abraham into whose bosom Lazarus was carried, was one who on earth had been rich in flocks, and herds, and in all possessions.”<sup>24</sup> Not money, but the love of money destroys men’s souls (1 Tim. 6:6-10).

He went to hell because he failed to realize that he was God’s trustee, with wealth and influence that could have been used for God’s glory, and for the spiritual and material benefit of his fellow-men. Thus it was his wickedness and not his wealth that brought him eternal misery. His selfishness, not his sensuality (not any conspicuous evil deeds, but his failure to have God at the center of his whole life) brought him under the

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condemnation of Him to whom he owed all that he possessed. No vices or crimes are laid to his charge. His sin was that he lived only for the present.<sup>25</sup>

We are wrong if we suppose that only openly wicked and rebellious souls are subject to the wrath of God. The monstrous criminals (from children through adults, male and female, rich and poor, educated and illiterate, etc.) who can easily be recognized for the treacherous crimes and atrocities that they commit are not the sole recipients of God's disfavor.

Although the rich man, along with his family, was godless, nothing is said about him being positively vicious. He is not described as being guilty of any glaring sin, or a monstrous member of society.<sup>26</sup>

As the riches themselves did not cause the rich man to be lost, the poverty and misery of Lazarus were not reasons for which the beggar was permitted to enter paradise in Hades.

The faith and patience of Lazarus must be assumed, since his poverty of itself would never have brought his to Abraham's bosom. In all homiletic use of this parable, this never should be left out of sight.<sup>27</sup>

Interestingly, after death, the roles of the rich man and the beggar were reversed. "The rich man had become a beggar."<sup>28</sup> First, he pled for himself for relief from the torment. Next, he begged for some extraordinary effort to convert his brethren. "But though repulsed for himself, he has a request to urge for others."<sup>29</sup> Both times his requests were rebuffed. Regarding the latter petition, extraordinary efforts had been expended already through "Moses and the prophets" (Luke 16:29). "After death those who are lost do not want their people lost."<sup>30</sup> "He could not bear the thought of a re-union in hell."<sup>31</sup> "In his death, the rich man was more of a pauper than Lazarus had ever been."<sup>32</sup>

*The Rich Man and Lazarus* is replete with information regarding a great number of Christian doctrines. ". . . Abraham said that God's written message was as effective as a voice from the dead."<sup>33</sup> "After death the rich man would have repented, but it was too late. 2 Cor. 6:2."<sup>34</sup> "Jesus endorsed the teaching of Moses and the prophets. Lk. 16:29-31."<sup>35</sup> Lockyer noted that the dead retain use of their "faculties."<sup>36</sup> "We have no light beyond the revelation of God."<sup>37</sup> "In the future, personality continues — feeling, knowing, seeing, reasoning and remembering."<sup>38</sup> ". . . this parable, teaching, as it does, the terrible end of those who live only for the gratification of their own sinful and selfish desires."<sup>39</sup>

1. Death cannot destroy consciousness. . . . 2. Death cannot destroy identity. . . . 3. Death cannot destroy memory. . . . Death cannot destroy destiny.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, one observant writer listed several religious beliefs that, incidentally, are disproved by the *Rich Man and Lazarus*. The parable of the *Rich Man and Lazarus*

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refutes several erroneous denominational doctrines, including: (1) Christian Science, which denies the reality of sin, sores, death and future punishment; (2) spiritualism or occultism, which claims that the spirits of the dead can communicate with the living or come back to earth; (3) Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses, which teach soul sleeping or the unconscious state of the death; (4) Catholicism, which teaches purgatory from which the wicked dead can be released; (5) Calvinism, which teaches that miraculous manifestations before the written Word can be effective to save souls; (6) a second chance after death; and, (7) that the dead lose their identity.<sup>41</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Apologies are extended to those who confidently affirm that the record of the *Rich Man and Lazarus* is not a parable. That evaluation may very well be correct. Parables, in part, may be defined as true stories or events that could have and often do occur. Further, whether parable or historical record, the narrative is equally true and contains valuable information for the children of God in every generation. If not a parable itself, the *Rich Man and Lazarus* is at least associated with a series of parables that Jesus presented.

Sometimes a passage is as useful to contemporary students for the incidentals used in the illustration as the divine truth illustrated in a Scripture. For instance, the process of death is defined concisely in James 2:26. "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also." The purpose of the verse is to teach the inseparable relationship between faith and physical activity which occurs as a result of that faith. However, the illustration is as enlightening as the information about faith and works. Death occurs when one's spirit leaves the body.

Likewise, the *Rich Man and Lazarus*, though overall teaching about the eternal disaster of misusing one's prosperity on earth, provides much information regarding what occurs after death and before final judgment. Reliable information concerning what occurs after death is not available through human experience. Therefore, the illustration used in the *Rich Man and Lazarus* is highly instructive since it provides details about the other side of the grave.

In life, hardly more vivid contrasts could be imagined as the contrast in circumstances between the rich man and Lazarus.

We have in fact the two descriptions stroke for stroke. Dives [the rich man] is covered with purple and fine linen; Lazarus is covered only with sores. The one fares sumptuously; the other desires to be fed with crumbs. The one (as we may imagine) has numerous attendants to humor every caprice; the other, only dogs to tend his sores.<sup>42</sup>

In death, the contrasts between the two men were no less apparent. The rich man received a foretaste of hell, whereas Lazarus received a foretaste of eternal bliss in heaven. "The two men Jesus portrayed were as opposite in death as they had been in life."<sup>43</sup>

9. At death the respective states into which the two men passed were not their final abodes. a. Lazarus was in Abraham's bosom — or paradise —

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and not in heaven. b. The rich man was in Hades. c. The rich man still had brothers on earth. d. The judgment had not taken place. e. The judgment is not to determine destiny, but a measuring and receiving of our reward.<sup>44</sup>

Whereas, for instance, Lazarus may have been unable to change the circumstances in which he found himself, both men had complete control regarding their eternal disposition in the afterlife.

. . . the rich man did not go to hell because he was rich, and Lazarus to Abraham's bosom because he was poor. There are multitudes of one-time rich persons in heaven, just as there are myriads of one-time poor people in hell. Neither affluence nor poverty determines the eternal state. Our relationship to Jesus Christ alone decides our eternal bliss or woe.<sup>45</sup>

Though life's circumstances may have determined each man's lot in life, the rich man and Lazarus respectively chose courses in life that necessitated eternal separation.

Who separated the rich man and Lazarus? Who fixed the chasm that divided them? Not God, not Christ, not the angels. These men separated themselves. While on earth there was a great chasm that marked them off from each other. They made different choices. They traveled different roads. They lived in different worlds. And that chasm that existed on earth, unchanged by death, continued on into eternity.<sup>46</sup>

The poor rich man realized too late that he was unprepared for eternity. He understood too late that his family, following his footsteps, would eventually join him in torment. "The rich offered two petitions, one for himself and one for his five brothers. Lk. 16:24, 27."<sup>47</sup> Did he fail to grasp the gravity of approaching eternity — as we sometimes also fail to grasp? Was he confident in his own standard of righteous and insensitive to God's standard of righteousness (Rom. 10:1-3)? This is a common malady of our day, too. We must suppose that if the rich man was ever thoughtful regarding the eternal disposition of his soul, that he incorrectly assumed that being a good moral person was satisfactory. We must ask ourselves whether we have made better plans for the eternal future than the rich man. Have you?

Plea bargains, reduced sentences, parole and probation are not viable options for anyone who finds himself in the predicament of the rich man, on the wrong side of the hadean gulf following death (Matt. 7:21-23). "If the Parables of Luke 15 speak of the mercy and compassion of God toward the penitent, the parable just considered presents in the clearest light the righteousness and righteous indignation toward those who died impenitent (Romans 1:18)."<sup>48</sup>

Finally, we must conclude that even what we would call *little sins* and especially the sins associated with affluence are capable of damning one's soul in a devil's hell forever. *The Rich Man and Lazarus* should be particularly alarming because it takes the mask off sins to which you and I are especially susceptible. Knowledge equates to responsibility

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and opportunity; what are you going to do with the insight afforded you through the *Rich Man and Lazarus* (2 Cor. 13:5)?

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

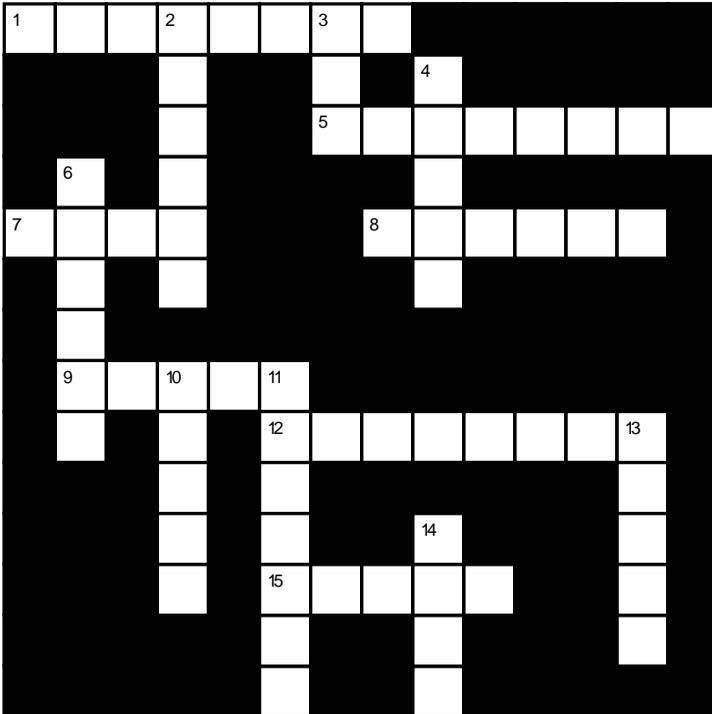
1. Is the *Rich Man and Lazarus* a parable? What are the ramifications if it is considered either a parable or not a parable?
2. Describe and contrast the soul's journey to Hades after death of unrighteous and righteous souls.
3. List the things changed and the things unchangeable by death.
4. Describe Hades and explain its relationship to the judgment, heaven and hell.
5. Explain the seriousness of sins of omission and how these sins affected the rich man.
6. In what ways could sins of omission affect Christians?
7. What does stewardship have to do with the *Rich Man and Lazarus*? What message does this narrative have for us regarding stewardship?
8. How do the lost feel about *family religion* and their yet living family members?
9. What information does the *Rich Man and Lazarus* provide beyond a warning about the misuse of one's wealth?
10. When will both the rich man and Lazarus be liberated from their respective abodes in Hades? What will become of each of them?
11. How was the rich man's temptation comparable to the temptations that Christians face?

### MORE QUESTIONS

1. Describe the audience to whom Jesus spoke the *Rich Man and Lazarus*.
2. What was the primary intended lesson of this narrative?
3. What three scenes are presented in this story?
4. Why do some references to this passage refer to it as *The Dives and Lazarus*?
5. The name Lazarus was the Greek form of what Hebrew name?
6. What does the name Lazarus mean?
7. What is the significance of the word "purple" in the Bible?
8. What appointment must every individual keep?
9. Why was Jesus the perfect person to elaborate concerning what occurs after death?
10. Contrast the probable funeral of the rich man with the likely disposition of the beggar's body.
11. How many spiritual abodes exist beyond death for accountable souls? Describe each one.
12. List the sins of commission of which the rich man was guilty.
13. What contribution did Lazarus' poverty make to his admission to "paradise"?
14. Who was the beggar in Hades in this passage?
15. For whom besides himself did the rich man make a petition?
16. In this chapter, we learned that what is as effective as a voice from the dead?

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17. What does this passage reveal about the attitude of Jesus toward Moses and the prophets?
18. True or False. The dead are unaware of their surroundings and have no memory of their past lives and family members.
19. How does this passage affect the doctrine of Christian Science? Spiritualism or occultism? Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses? Catholicism? Calvinism? A second chance after death? That the dead lose their identity?
20. If not poverty or riches, what determines where one will spend eternity?
21. Who chose the eternal destinies of the rich man and Lazarus?
22. How serious are *little* or otherwise *respectable* sins?



### The Rich Man and Lazarus

#### Across

1. This narrative provides a glimpse of this.
5. Type of sin of which the rich man was guilty.
7. This narrative is found only in this book.
8. The rich man became this after death.
9. Bible character who sold dye.
12. After death, persons for whom the rich man was concerned.
15. Place of departed spirits.

#### Down

2. Jesus taught about the proper use of these.
3. Number of eternal abodes.
4. Latin term for 'rich man.'
6. Color that symbolizes wealth and royalty.
10. Appointment that cannot be missed.
11. Deceased patriarch in this chapter.
13. Use of these differs from Jesus' parables.
14. The rich man received a foretaste of this.

### ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Roy, 74.
  - <sup>2</sup> Lockyer, 292.
  - <sup>3</sup> Lightfoot, II, 43.
  - <sup>4</sup> Roy, 74.
  - <sup>5</sup> Lightfoot, II, 44.
  - <sup>6</sup> Lockyer, 293.
  - <sup>7</sup> Lightfoot, II, 43.
  - <sup>8</sup> Lockyer, 293.

- <sup>9</sup> Trench, 163.  
<sup>10</sup> Lockyer, 294.  
<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.  
<sup>12</sup> Trench, 165.  
<sup>13</sup> Lockyer, 294.  
<sup>14</sup> Roy, 75.  
<sup>15</sup> Lockyer, 294.  
<sup>16</sup> Lightfoot, 47.  
<sup>17</sup> Trench, 165.  
<sup>18</sup> Lightfoot, II, 46.  
<sup>19</sup> Trench, 163.  
<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.  
<sup>21</sup> Roy, 74.  
<sup>22</sup> Lockyer, 295.  
<sup>23</sup> Lightfoot, II, 47-48.  
<sup>24</sup> Trench, 165.  
<sup>25</sup> Lockyer, 293.  
<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.  
<sup>27</sup> Trench, 164-165.  
<sup>28</sup> Lightfoot, II, 45.  
<sup>29</sup> Trench, 168.  
<sup>30</sup> Roy, 75.  
<sup>31</sup> Lockyer, 295.  
<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.  
<sup>33</sup> Lightfoot, II, 48.  
<sup>34</sup> Roy, 76.  
<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>36</sup> Lockyer, 294.  
<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.  
<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.  
<sup>40</sup> Lightfoot, 45-46.  
<sup>41</sup> Roy, 77-78.  
<sup>42</sup> Trench, 164.  
<sup>43</sup> Lockyer, 293.  
<sup>44</sup> Roy, 75.  
<sup>45</sup> Lockyer, 292.  
<sup>46</sup> Lightfoot, 47.  
<sup>47</sup> Roy, 75.  
<sup>48</sup> Lockyer, 295.

# Chapter 11: The Unjust Judge

(Luke 18:1-8)

## INTRODUCTION

The Pharisees critically quizzed Jesus regarding when the kingdom of God would come (Luke 17:20). Our Lord answered,

“ . . . The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:20-21).

Then, Jesus turned to his disciples and expounded concerning his second coming in verses 22-37. Also in Matthew 24 Jesus addressed his disciples, speaking first about the establishment of the kingdom, and secondly about his second coming. At least our Lord’s disciples, then, are designated by the word “them” in Luke 18:1.

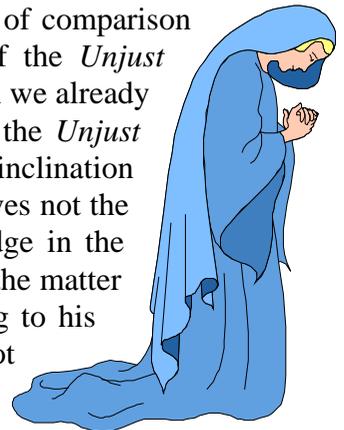
A. In Luke 17:22-37 Jesus gave a discourse to His disciples regarding His Second Coming. B. Unto those same disciples — “them” (18:) — was this parable spoken.<sup>1</sup>

Among the illustrations and parables presented by Jesus, the parable of the *Unjust Judge* must appear on the surface to be an awkward allusion to deity. The apparent difficulty, of course, is the comparison of a benevolent God to a wicked man.

Coming to our Lord’s application of His parable it may be surprising to find that He compares the dealings of God with those, not of a good man, but of a bad, godless man, and this feature but adds force to the parable.<sup>2</sup>

At first glance, one imagines that there are no instances of comparison that can be correctly made. However, as in the parable of the *Unjust Steward*, which largely presents the same difficulty, and which we already noticed, the evil activity is not commended. The parable of the *Unjust Steward* praised alert and perceptive talents, not the steward’s inclination to misuse his abilities. The parable of the *Unjust Judge* approves not the judge, but the persistence of the petitioner. Whereas the judge in the parable is despicable and only reluctantly exercises justice in the matter brought before him, God gladly and expeditiously (according to his will) responds to the prayers of his children. So, God is not really compared regarding character to the unjust judge. The similarity is that both are the objects of persistent petitions.

The primary dissimilarity is that the Heavenly Father eagerly responds to prayerful entreaties. “If a bad man will yield to the mere force of the importunity which he hates,



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how much more certainly will a righteous God be prevailed on by the faithful prayer which He loves.”<sup>3</sup>

A main point of this parable is the obvious contrasts. If an unrighteous judge will bend to the persistence of a brow-beating widow, then surely a righteous God will hear the cries of His patient children.<sup>4</sup>

This parable is about prayer. As Neil Lightfoot observed, prayer was a significant part of the life of Jesus Christ. Further, according to Lightfoot, Luke especially observed those prayers in his Gospel record.

The great occasions of Jesus' earthly ministry were ushered in with prayer. There is the baptism of Jesus. Luke is the only writer who mentions that Jesus was praying when the Holy Spirit descended upon him (Luke 3:21). It is Luke who tells us that Jesus continued all night in prayer before choosing the twelve apostles (Luke 6:12-13). Again it is Luke who describes the Great Confession at Caesarea Philippi as being accompanied with prayer (Luke 9:18). And Luke is the only writer to point out that Jesus was praying at the time of his glorification on the Mount of Transfiguration (Luke 9:28). The image of Jesus as a praying man was precious to Luke and to the early church. If Jesus needed prayer, if the early church needed to pray, we cannot need less today.<sup>5</sup>

Further, according to Herbert Lockyer, this and one other parable (*the Pharisee and the Publican*) are the only two parables, both found exclusively in Luke, that announce, before giving the parable, the application of the parable.

. . . the only two recorded parables in which the reason for giving them is stated? Both parables are related to prayer.<sup>6</sup>

Neil Lightfoot adds that only this and one other recorded parable of our Lord (*the Friend at Midnight*) deal primarily with the topic of prayer.

. . . these two are the only ones recorded that deal specifically with the subject of prayer. They are both found in the Gospel of Luke. According to Luke the two parables were given on different occasions . . .<sup>7</sup>

Prayer is an indispensable and habitual element of Christian living. However, prayer is not something into which one may invest himself irrespective of God's design and regard for it. For prayer to be productive, one must realize:

c. God hears our prayers conditionally. (1). He will hear those who hear him. Lk. 6:46; Matt. 7:21; Prov. 28:9. (2). . . pray with the proper spirit. Lk. 22:42; Rev. 22:17. (3). . . pray in faith. James 1:5-8. (4). . . pray according to his will. 1 Jn. 5:14; Lk. 22:41, 42. (5). . . He will hear those who are righteous. 1 Pet. 3:12. (6). . . He will hear those who forgive. Matt. 6:12-15. (7). He will not hear a willful sinner's prayer. Jn. 9:31; Psa. 66:18. (8). He will not hear prayers in substitution for other commands.<sup>8</sup>

### THE PARABLE

“And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint; Saying, There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, neither regarded man: And there was a widow in that city; and she came unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversary. And he would not for a while: but afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man; Yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me. And the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge saith. And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:1-8).

The first verse of the parable of the *Unjust Judge* announces the purpose of the parable, namely, “men ought always to pray, and not to faint.” Whatever, then, that follows must be understood regarding persistency in prayers. The emphasis is not really on the judge in the parable, but on the widow who represents the children of God who pray. The judge in the parable corresponds to God the Father, only as the recipient of petitions. Unlike the judge, God solicits and desires prayer. Too, the motives from which the judge acted and God acts are entirely different and incompatible.

In the second verse, a singular judge in a city is introduced. “The judge was probably a Roman because one man could not constitute a Jewish court.”<sup>9</sup> He is further described as one who regards neither God nor man. “It is a natural consequence to disregard man when one has no fear of God (cf. Psa. 14:1; Rom. 3:5-18).”<sup>10</sup> This judge was not qualified for the position entrusted to him.

The next verse acquaints the reader with the second person in the parable — the troubled widow. She sought justice through the mechanism of the law afforded her. The fault was not with the provision for dispensing judgment, but with the individual, the judge, who was empowered to dispense justice. It is assumed that the widow had a valid complaint since she alone sought intervention through lawful judication. She desired only what was right and legally her recourse in response to mistreatment. The widow sought to be avenged.

The word “avenge” used of the unrighteous judge, and here of God, means, the working out of His vengeance, not in the sense of retaliation, but of vindication or justice. His elect, if wrongly treated, can be sure of His vindication.<sup>11</sup>

The widow claimed to have an adversary from whom she sought legal constraint. God through Judaism granted special protection for the defenseless widow and orphan (Deut. 10:18; 14:29; 24:17, 19-21; 26:12-13; 27:19; Psa. 68:5; 146:9; Prov. 15:25; Isa. 1:17; Jer. 7:6; 22:3; Zech. 7:10; Mal. 3:5).

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“Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child. If thou afflict them in any wise, and they cry at all unto me, I will surely hear their cry; And my wrath shall wax hot, and I will kill you with the sword; and your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless” (Exod. 22:22-24).

Evidently, widows were then as now the special targets of evil men who desire to enrich themselves through fraud against the helpless. Jesus accused the scribes and Pharisees of pretending piety while enriching themselves through oppression of widows. “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows’ houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation” (Matt. 23:16).

After the widow continued to pester the judge, he, as we would say, started talking to himself. He reasoned (probably not audibly but silently) that the complainant would not relent until she received satisfaction. He was careful to assure himself that his motivation was not affected by the demands of mortals or even God. He, therefore, prided himself in that his actions, though they would perhaps appear noble, were consistent with his selfish disposition. Whereas others might pride themselves, after reflection, that their conduct was consistent with the ethical standard to which they subscribed, this man prided himself in that his conduct was consistent with his lack of integrity.

a. He feared not God. Lk. 18:4. b. He regarded not man. Lk. 18:4. c. He finally gave justice, not because he was just, but to keep from being bothered. Lk. 18:5.<sup>12</sup>

The catalyst for action on behalf of the widow was “she weary me” (Luke 18:5).

“Weary me” means “to wear out,” to come to blows, to strike under the eyes, to bruise me. Literally the phrase means, “Come to blows and give me a pair of black eyes.”<sup>13</sup>

Since this judge was selfishly interested in himself alone, he may have been the kind of judge who sought bribes. Widows, as they are described in the Bible, lacked sufficient means to extend a bribe even if they were so inclined. The role of judges was regulated, especially regarding taking bribes.

“Thou shalt not wrest the judgment of thy poor in his cause. Keep thee far from a false matter; and the innocent and righteous slay thou not: for I will not justify the wicked. And thou shalt take no gift: for the gift blindeth the wise, and perverteth the words of the righteous. Also thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exod. 23:6-9).

In Luke 18:6-8, Jesus contrasted the evil judge with the righteous Heavenly Father. Whereas the unjust judge loathed to grant righteous judgment, God happily acknowledges the prayers of “his own elect.” Through this parable, one can see that “. . . God is not indifferent toward the prayers of his children. Lk. 18:7, 8.”<sup>14</sup> Further, “. . . we see that earnest prayer is rewarded.”<sup>15</sup> “We can expect better treatment from a God of love than a heartless judge.”<sup>16</sup>

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Verse eight advises that God, in response to frequent prayerful petitioners, “will avenge them speedily.” The speed with which God grants that for which we ask may not correspond to the haste with which we desire his assenting action. Otherwise, if God immediately bestowed the blessings sought, there would be no occasion for persistency in prayer. “We must persist in our prayers.”<sup>17</sup>

. . . prayer must be persistent. This is the main point of the parables.<sup>18</sup>

We should exercise patience and not become discouraged if we do not receive an immediate answer to our prayers. a. The delay may test our faith. b. The things for which we pray might not be best for us.<sup>19</sup>

. . . tried by divine delay in answer to prayer and are tempted to give up the praying attitude. To all such this parable speaks with an encouraging voice.<sup>20</sup>

The last verse of the parable of the *Unjust Judge* ponders whether upon the return of the Lord if faith that manifests itself in persistent, patient prayer will be found, even among God’s people. “. . . Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?” If God answers prayer, and he does, his children must word those prayers, with confidence, before they can be answered. Of all people, Christians must believe in prayer and foster no doubt that God through his invisible providence will answer them according to his divine will. **We need to be a praying people!**

### CONCLUSION

The Bible addresses prayer often throughout its pages. Following are some of those references. “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord: but **the prayer of the upright is his delight** . . . The Lord is far from the wicked: but **he heareth the prayer of the righteous**” (Prov. 15:8, 29). “He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination” (Prov. 28:9). “But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and **pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you**” (Matt. 5:44). Our Lord’s *model prayer* appears in Matthew 6:5-18.

Matthew 7:11 compares and contrasts an earthly father with the Heavenly Father. The contrast is that our Father in heaven is righteous and mankind is wicked. This analysis is similar to the illustration in the parable of the *Unjust Judge*. “**Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? **If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?**” (Matt. 7:7-11).**

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Additional biblical references to prayer include: “And all things, **whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive**” (Matt. 21:22). “**Watch and pray**, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt. 26:41). “Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; **continuing instant in prayer**” (Rom. 12:12). “What is it then? **I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also . . .**” (1 Cor. 14:15). “**Praying always with all prayer and supplication** in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints” (Eph. 6:18). “Be careful for nothing; but in every thing **by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God**” (Phil. 4:6). “**Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving**” (Col. 4:2). “**Pray without ceasing**” (1 Thess. 5:17).

“I exhort therefore, that, first of all, **supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority;** that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty” (1 Tim. 2:1-2). “**But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering.** For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed” (Jam. 1:6). “. . . yet **ye have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss,** that ye may consume it upon your lusts” (Jam. 4:2-3). “**Is any among you afflicted? let him pray.** Is any merry? let him sing psalms” (Jam. 5:13). “. . . The **effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much**” (Jam. 5:16).

“**For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers:** but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil” (1 Pet. 3:12). “. . . **watch unto prayer**” (1 Pet. 4:7). “And **whatsoever we ask, we receive** of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight” (1 John 3:22). “And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, **if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us:** And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that **we have the petitions that we desired of him**” (1 John 5:14-15).

It is axiomatic that “. . . a prayer must be sincere.”<sup>21</sup> Yet, sometimes the obvious is not apparent to everyone, including the sincerity with which a prayer ought to be uttered. Therefore, Jesus decried vain, repetitious prayers (Matt. 6:7). Some religious groups have reduced prayer to mechanized recitals of rote prayers handed down from generation to generation. We may even find ourselves mouthing familiar phrases in prayer that have long ago lost their impact and significance. Too, sometimes prayers revolve around generalities and exhibit a lack of thoughtfulness in prayer.

But we are not only to ask, but to keep on asking, seeking and knocking until the door of heaven opens. In our continual praying we are to be specific as the widow was who day after day, approached the judge with the same petition. Often our prayers are too general and aimless.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, the remarkable and interesting parable of the *Unjust Judge*, in concert with numerous passages regarding prayer throughout the Bible, emphasizes the vital place of prayer in the lives of God’s children. Prayer is perhaps underestimated in contemporary

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Christianity, especially among those who enjoy relative affluence. Frequent prayer and less self-reliance should adorn our Christian living. We should pray often, and relentlessly pray again and again about those things that are dearest in our hearts.

The object of The Parable of the Judge was to teach perseverance in prayer. God will certainly answer though He may seem for a time to disregard our petition.<sup>23</sup>

Fortunately, “God has assured us that He hears and answers prayer, and this should induce us to continue asking.”<sup>24</sup>

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Describe respective attitudes of the judge in the parable and God regarding the petitions directed to each one. Further, examine the motives from which each responded.
2. Explain the relationship between regard for God and regard for one’s fellow man.
3. Describe the code of ethics or moral standard to which the judge in the parable subscribed. How was his disposition like or unlike the disposition of contemporary society?
4. What in the last verse of this parable indicates that persistency in prayer is not popular, even among the children of God? What are some of the things that may interfere with one’s persistency in prayer?
5. Select a verse from this chapter on prayer and explain why that passage should be especially meaningful to the contemporary children of God.
6. What tendencies in prayers can adversely affect the sincerity with they are prayed?

### MORE QUESTIONS

1. To whom did Jesus speak the parable of the *Unjust Judge*?
2. Why might this parable be thought to be somewhat awkward?
3. Name another parable of our Lord that may appear awkward for the same reason?
4. What is approved in the parable of the *Unjust Judge*?
5. What is the dissimilarity between the Unjust Judge and God?
6. The chief topic of this parable is what?
7. The fact that Jesus prayed often means what to us?
8. What two parables are prefaced with the reason for which they were presented?
9. The parable of the *Unjust Judge* and what other parable deal primarily with prayer?
10. Describe the conditions under which God will hear and the conditions under which God refuses to acknowledge prayers.
11. Who does the widow in the parable represent? Who does the judge represent?
12. List some of the provisions God placed in Judaism for the protection of widows.
13. Who especially made themselves the enemies of widows in first century Judaea?
14. Why did the judge act on behalf of the widow?

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15. To what temptation were judges especially vulnerable and against which the Bible warns?
16. What are some reasons why God may not grant our petitions or may not grant them as quickly as we wish?
17. What information derived from the parable of the *Unjust Judge* should encourage Christians to pray frequently?

### ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Jackson, 57.
- <sup>2</sup> Lockyer, 300.
- <sup>3</sup> Trench, 177.
- <sup>4</sup> Jackson, 58.
- <sup>5</sup> Lightfoot, I, 63-64.
- <sup>6</sup> Lockyer, 299.
- <sup>7</sup> Lightfoot, I, 62.
- <sup>8</sup> Roy, 83.
- <sup>9</sup> Lightfoot, I, 63.
- <sup>10</sup> Jackson, 57.
- <sup>11</sup> Lockyer, 300.
- <sup>12</sup> Roy, 82.
- <sup>13</sup> Lockyer, 300.
- <sup>14</sup> Roy, 82.
- <sup>15</sup> Lightfoot, I, 65.
- <sup>16</sup> Lockyer, 301.
- <sup>17</sup> Jackson, 59.
- <sup>18</sup> Lightfoot, I, 65.
- <sup>19</sup> Roy, 83.
- <sup>20</sup> Lockyer, 299.
- <sup>21</sup> Lightfoot, I, 64.
- <sup>22</sup> Lockyer, 298.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

# Chapter 12: The Pharisee and the Publican

(Luke 18:9-14)

## INTRODUCTION

The parable of *The Pharisee and the Publican* is recorded exclusively in Luke's Gospel. Its placement follows immediately the parable of the *Unjust Judge*. However, it is difficult to ascertain whether the parable was spoken by Jesus immediately following the *Unjust Judge* or if Luke placed the parable there due to the similar content — prayer.

There is an obvious connection between this parable and the preceding one as indicated by the connective “and” (Lk. 18:9). Whether the parable was spoken immediately following the former, or whether incorporated here by Luke because of similar subject matter, it is difficult to determine.<sup>1</sup>

The audience, if the parables were presented sequentially, included but was not limited to the disciples of our Lord. Much of the time during the earthly ministry of Christ, multitudes followed him nearly everywhere he went. This necessitated Jesus sometimes retiring beyond the reach of the crowds (Mark 1:33-37; 6:31-33; Luke 4:32; John 6:15). Like John the Baptist, Jesus sometimes addressed especially segments of a larger audience (Matt. 3:1-12; Luke 16:1, 14). The targeted audience of the parable of *The Pharisee and the Publican* is stated: “And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others” (Luke 18:9).

The purpose of the parable of *The Pharisee and the Publican* was similar to the previous parable but augmented that lesson with an additional moral. “The last parable was to teach us that prayer must be earnest and persevering; this, that it must also be humble.”<sup>2</sup>

The parable revolves around two characters — a Pharisee and a publican. The first character in this parable is the Pharisee.

1. The sect of the Pharisees — “separated ones” — had its origin in the inter-biblical age, as a reaction against Hebrew acceptance of Greek culture. There were some 6,000 Pharisees at the time of Christ's birth. a. Though they were the strictest sect of Judaism (Acts 26:5), they frequently bound traditions that made void the law (Mt. 15:1-9).<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, obscuring any admirable qualities, Pharisees are best remembered for their subversion of God's law by appending it with their own declarations. “The leading characteristics of the Pharisees were formality, self-righteousness, and hypocrisy.”<sup>4</sup>

The Pharisee was on the top rung of the social ladder, the tax collector was at the bottom. One man was respected and honored, the other was an

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outcast, a traitor and a robber. How amazing it is, then, that Jesus dared to compare them.<sup>5</sup>

Publicans were Jews who made their living by collecting taxes from their fellow Jews for the Roman government. The distaste the Jews had for subjection to the Rome was intensified toward Jews who cooperated in this way with the Romans. Tax collection seems to be universally unpleasant, but combined with extortion or the perception of extortion, paying one's taxes was even more repugnant. The Pharisee was not alone in his assessment of publicans.

The publican was a tax collector for the Roman government. They were considered as traitors by the Jews and hence, as a despised group, they were classed with Gentiles (Mt. 18:17), with harlots (Mt. 21:31-33), and with sinners (Mt. 9:10, 11; Lk. 7:34; 15:1).<sup>6</sup>

The publicans were men hired by the Roman officials to assess, collect, and turn over tax returns to the Roman government. They were to the Jewish people what the IRS is to us.<sup>7</sup>

Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-9) and the apostle Matthew (Matt. 9:9; 10:2-5) are two publicans named in Scripture with whom Jesus interacted in his ministry.

### THE PARABLE

“And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted” (Luke 18:9-14).



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Among those who on some occasion approached the temple to pray were these two men, in the parable Jesus unfolded. The Bible is accurate even in what appear to be incidentals, in this case regarding geography. “The temple was on Mt. Moriah, hence they literally went ‘up’ to pray — probably at one of the regular hours of prayer (Lk. 1:10; Acts 3:1; 10:30).”<sup>8</sup> This subtlety is true throughout the Bible, not only regarding geography but respecting every science it may address even in passing.

Their *posture* for prayer, which was not an issue, was that they stood while they prayed. Various postures are associated with God-approved prayers throughout the Bible (e.g., kneeling, 1 Kings 8:54; 2 Chron. 6:13; Psa. 95:6; Isa. 45:23; Luke 22:41; Acts 7:60; Eph. 3:14; bowing one’s head, Gen. 24:26; Exod. 4:31; 12:27; lying face down, Gen. 24:52; Matt. 26:39; Mark 14:35; standing with hands raised toward heaven, 1 Kings 8:22; standing, 1 Sam. 1:26; 2 Chron. 20:9; Mark 11:25; Luke 18:11, 1).

However, regarding the *standing* prayer posture of the Pharisee and the publican:

Two words are used for the one English word, stood. The one Jesus used of the Pharisee standing (taking up his position ostentatiously) . . . With the publican, “stood” means he stood with a bowed head and sorrowful countenance . . .<sup>9</sup>

The Pharisee mouthed a prayer of the strangest variety. He prayed not to God, but with himself. Ordinarily prayers are comprised of thanks and requests directed to the Heavenly Father for sundry blessings. Not so here. “Though the prayer parades as thanksgiving, he expresses no thanks for any blessings from God, either physical or spiritual.”<sup>10</sup>

His thanksgiving was in the form of self-gratification. What a spectacle is here! A man praying, yet no gratitude to, or adoration for God. He asked for nothing, confessed nothing, and received nothing.<sup>11</sup>

“. . . [U]nder pretended thankfulness self-exaltation is thinly veiled.”<sup>12</sup>

Praying with himself, the Pharisee used thirty-four words to the publican’s seven words — almost seven times as long a prayer. It was also a prayer conspicuous for its five big I’s. Thus it was a prayer of self-congratulation . . .<sup>13</sup>

“The Pharisee’s prayer was a prayer of pride and self reassurance.”<sup>14</sup>

He began his prayer by making a negative assessment of his virtues.

. . . the Pharisee enumerated three articulate and manifest forms of wickedness. He was not an — “Extortioner” . . . “Unjust” . . . “Adulterer” . . .<sup>15</sup>

Next, his prayer switched to the positive and continued to exalt his virtues. The Pharisee claimed to fast twice a week and to give 10% of all that he possessed. “The Pharisees usually fasted on Mondays and Thursdays, for Moses was supposed to have ascended Mt. Sinai on Monday and descended on a Thursday.”<sup>16</sup>

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Then from the negative, he went to the positive, “I fast twice in the week.” The Law required only one fast in a year, that on the great day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29; Numbers 29:7). But this supposedly devout Jew fasted every Monday and Thursday during the weeks between the Passover and Pentecost, and again between the Feast of Tabernacles and that of the Dedication of the Temple. “I give tithes of all that I possess.” The Law only required the Israelite to tithe on his gains, his annual increase, not on his possessions (Genesis 28:22; Deuteronomy 14:22; Leviticus 27:30).<sup>17</sup>

The Pharisee, and other Pharisees too, doubtless possessed many good qualities, deserving emulation.

The Pharisee had nothing said against his morality and integrity. . . . The Pharisee was liberal with his wealth.<sup>18</sup>

One can to some degree commend the Pharisee because he is not wholly bad. Many things he mentioned would qualify him as a great person in today’s society. . . . prayerful man . . . unquestionable moral integrity . . . a man of fasting . . .<sup>19</sup>

Irrespective, though, of how contemporary society views one’s conduct, more importantly, each soul’s earthly conduct must pass Divine review also (2 Cor. 5:10). Further, good virtues can be overshadowed by one’s sins (Ezek. 33:13). This Pharisee “. . . was blinded to his sinful self.”<sup>20</sup>

The publican in the parable exhibited a much different attitude from the Pharisee. He was aware of his shortcomings — perhaps to a fault. “The two men who went up into the outer temple to pray, are different in character, creed and self-examination.”<sup>21</sup> It appears that the publican’s stationed himself in a less prominent place than the Pharisee. His self-placement in the temple and the prayer he verbalized set him apart from the Pharisee — and closer to God!

1. Though he was afar off from the Pharisee, he was nigh to God (Psa. 51:17). 2. Like Ezra (9:6), he was ashamed to look upward (cf. Lk. 15:18).<sup>22</sup>

“God, be merciful to me a sinner.” Only a seven-word prayer, yet it reached the ear of God because it emphasized three features: I am a great sinner; I am liable to, and deserve punishment; I beg for pardon of sin, mercy, and remission of deserved punishment.<sup>23</sup>

“The publican called himself ‘the sinner’ — an expression similar to Paul’s ‘chief of sinners’ (Tim. 1:15).”<sup>24</sup>

In the Greek language the definite article is attached to sinner, not a sinner, but the sinner. He regards himself as the worst of sinners, the

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sinner of sinners. His prayer was not a long payer, only seven words; but it went to the heart of the matter, and was unsurpassably sincere.<sup>25</sup>

Jesus evaluated the spiritual condition of the two men. Interestingly, the Pharisee's evaluation of himself was that he was only righteous, which estimate Jesus did not share. Also, the publican's self-examination was that he was only unrighteous, with which appraisal Jesus did not agree either. Jesus "abased" the haughty Pharisee and "exalted" the humble publican.

Both men went home justified but with a different kind of justification. The Pharisee went to his house wrapped in the same garment of self-justification he wore into the temple. Justifying himself, he was unaccepted and unapproved. But the publican went home divinely justified. Self-condemned, he received a righteousness apart from works and thus went home with the joy of sins forgiven (Romans 3:24-25; 4:5-6; 5:9).<sup>26</sup>

### CONCLUSION

The parable of *The Pharisee and the publican* addresses both prayer and the attitude with which if one prays his prayer is acceptable to God. The Pharisee thought too highly of himself, in the course of which he: (1) did not think highly enough of God to adore him, and (2) diminished his perception of other sons of Abraham. ". . . [W]hoever deceives himself by a false confidence, cannot fail to magnify himself above others."<sup>27</sup>

But the Pharisee erred in that it is not the office of one sinner to judge and condemn another, which he did when he dragged the publican into his make-believe prayer to furnish the dark background on which the bright colors of his own virtues could be more gloriously displayed.<sup>28</sup>

Whereas Christians are called upon by the Bible to compare human deportment with biblical teaching (Matt. 7:15-20; 1 John 4:1), no mortal has the responsibility or the insight to consign a soul to eternal torment. Rather, we are called upon by God's Word to love the souls of even those who make themselves our enemies (Matt. 5:44). We ought to rescue souls from certain damnation (Jam. 5:19-20; Jude 22-23).

There are several catalogs of sins throughout the Bible. Although any sin for which one does not repent is enough to cause a soul to be lost (Rom. 6:23), some sins are even more abominable to God than others. The spiritual malady affecting the Pharisee is among such sins in one biblical list — "a proud look" (Prov. 6:16-19; 21:4). Also, "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18).

Contrasts between the Pharisee and the publican are several. "The Pharisee cast a haughty look heavenward but the publican would not lift up his eyes unto heaven."<sup>29</sup>

Further, whereas the Pharisee assessed himself through a comparison with other men, the publican was more concerned about his own spiritual condition. This Pharisee . . .

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. . . made the mistake of measuring himself by the other fellow. He was always scrutinizing others.<sup>30</sup>

He would have done well to address his spiritual needs (Matt. 7:1-5; John 7:24), and even when mentioning the publican the Pharisee expressed no interest in the spiritual welfare of the his fellow Jew (1 Cor. 10:24). Perhaps to the surprise of all who listened to the unfolding of the parable (as well as contemporary students of the homily), being religious — even if one is sincere — is not enough by itself.

The publican in the parable was not demonstrating a personality defect — an inferiority complex. He exhibited a godly disposition that other Bible characters also shared. “And said, O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens” (Ezra 9:6). The publican evidenced the virtue that was the object of Jesus’ parable (Matt. 5:3).

VI. The Characteristics of the Poor in Spirit. . . . 2. They are lowly and recognize their weaknesses. They strive to live better and to do more in God’s service. Phil. 3:13-14. 3. They will count others better than themselves. Phil. 2:3-4.<sup>31</sup>

As often with parables and other illustrations employed in the Bible, one must be careful not to press the meaning or application beyond the inspired message. For instance, the parable of *The Pharisee and the publican* **does not** pertain to redemption in the *Christian Age*. “One erroneous teaching relative to this parable is that men can be saved in answer to prayer alone.”<sup>32</sup>

2. Both were Jews. 3. Both were in covenant relationship with God; therefore neither represented the alien sinner.<sup>33</sup>

Whatever or however this man was justified, has no bearing on the way that man is saved today. Jesus had not sealed his covenant at this point. The gospel of the great commission had not been validated for the testator was yet alive.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, the reason for which Jesus gave the parable of *The Pharisee and the publican* is apparent. The parable’s objective touched both prayer and humility.

II. The Purpose of the Parable. 1. To condemn self-righteousness. Lk. 18:9. 2. To teach that one must humble himself to be exalted. Lk. 18:14.<sup>35</sup>

The parable fitly concludes with words Jesus had used before (Luke 14:11), but which well bear repletion: “Every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.”<sup>36</sup>

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### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the purpose of the parable of *The Pharisee and the publican*?
2. Discuss and evaluate the vices and the admirable characteristics of the Pharisees. Include in your observations under what circumstances attributes of the Pharisees may or may not be correctly applied to persons now living.
3. Describe and evaluate the misdirected prayer of the Pharisee.
4. Compare the number of words in the Pharisee's prayer versus the publican's prayer.
5. Describe the justification with each the Pharisee and the publican left the temple.
6. Identify two attitudes that grow out of one's thinking too highly of himself.
7. Contrast the error of the Pharisee's condemnation of the publican and the responsibility Christians have to discern between truth and error.
8. Explain how God views sin generally and how he views some sins differently.
9. Discuss how religious sincerity is not sufficient alone.
10. Discuss the difference between an inferiority complex and humility.
11. How can a parable such as this one be misconstrued to teach religious error?

### MORE QUESTIONS

1. List the passages in which the parable of *The Pharisee and the Publican* appears.
2. What relationship do the parables of the *Unjust Judge* and *The Pharisee and the Publican* sustain to each other?
3. Identify the *targeted audience* for the parable addressed in Chapter Twelve.
4. Describe the origin of the sect of the Pharisees.
5. Briefly contrast the esteem in which the Pharisees and the publicans were held generally.
6. Name two publicans with whom Jesus was familiar.
7. What in this parable may be considered an incidental which though is nevertheless correct?
8. Name of the hill on which the temple sat.
9. List some of the God-approved postures noted in the Bible for prayer.
10. What was different between the standing posture of the Pharisee versus the publican?
11. Describe the background for the fasting practiced by the Pharisees.
12. Name two other Bible characters who exhibited a similar disposition of the publican in the parable.
13. About whose spiritual condition was the publican the most concerned?
14. Under what religious disposition did the Pharisee and the publican live?

### ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Jackson, 59.

<sup>2</sup> Trench, 181.

<sup>3</sup> Jackson, 60.

<sup>4</sup> Roy, 85.

## Chapter 12: The Pharisee and the Publican

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<sup>5</sup> Lightfoot, II, 52.

<sup>6</sup> Jackson, 60.

<sup>7</sup> Warner W. Kirby, "The Pharisee And The Publican," *The Parables of Our Savior*, Indianapolis, Garfield Heights church of Christ, 202.

<sup>8</sup> Jackson, 60.

<sup>9</sup> Lockyer, 303.

<sup>10</sup> Jackson, 61.

<sup>11</sup> Lockyer, 303.

<sup>12</sup> Trench, 181.

<sup>13</sup> Lockyer, 303.

<sup>14</sup> Lightfoot, II, 53.

<sup>15</sup> Lockyer, 303.

<sup>16</sup> Lightfoot, II, 53.

<sup>17</sup> Lockyer, 304.

<sup>18</sup> Roy, 85.

<sup>19</sup> Kirby, 203.

<sup>20</sup> Lightfoot, II, 53.

<sup>21</sup> Lockyer, 302.

<sup>22</sup> Jackson, 61.

<sup>23</sup> Lockyer, 304-305.

<sup>24</sup> Jackson, 61.

<sup>25</sup> Lightfoot, II, 54.

<sup>26</sup> Lockyer, 305.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Lockyer, 304.

<sup>30</sup> Lightfoot, II, 53.

<sup>31</sup> Roy, 86.

<sup>32</sup> Kirby, 208.

<sup>33</sup> Roy, 85.

<sup>34</sup> Kirby, 209.

<sup>35</sup> Roy, 85.

<sup>36</sup> Lockyer, 305.

# Chapter 13: The Two Sons

(Matt. 21:28-32)

## INTRODUCTION

The background to this parable is quite lively. The two days prior and the very moments preceding the giving of the parable of *The Two Sons* bristle with activity. We are indebted to brother Roy Deaver for the following summary of these events.

It was Monday, during the week in which the Lord would be crucified. On Sunday had occurred the Lord's great triumphal entry into Jerusalem. . . . On this Monday the Lord had entered the temple. He had driven out all those who were buying and selling in its courts. . . . He had healed the blind and the lame. The chief priests and the scribes took notice. The children shouted in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" The chief priests and the scribes said: "Do you hear what they are saying?" Jesus said to them: "From the mouths of babes and nurslings Thou hast perfected praise." . . . On this Monday the Lord had denounced the barren fig tree . . . The Lord went out to Bethany to spend the night.

On Tuesday, the Lord was met by and was challenged by the chief priests and the elders. "By what authority," they asked. "By what authority did you (1) drive out the money changers, (2) overthrow the tables, (3) heal the blind and the lame, and (4) allow the children to call you the Son of David?" In this question the chief priests and the elders were actually affirming: You have no authority to do these things. . . . they had seen His miracles — the healing of the blind and the lame. Their question was clearly one which revealed their prejudice, their hypocrisy, and their dishonesty.<sup>1</sup>

So began our Lord's final week of his earthly ministry. The background to the parable of *The Two Sons* is recorded in Matthew 20:29-21:27.

This parable, then, was a reply to the chief priests and elders who questioned Jesus' activities over the past two days and the teaching that he was doing in the temple when they interrupted him. These religious leaders framed their denial of Jesus' authority as a question, to which Jesus responded with a question.

"And Jesus answered and said unto them, I also will ask you one thing, which if ye tell me, I in like wise will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men? And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him? But if we shall say, Of men; we fear the people; for all hold John as a prophet. And they

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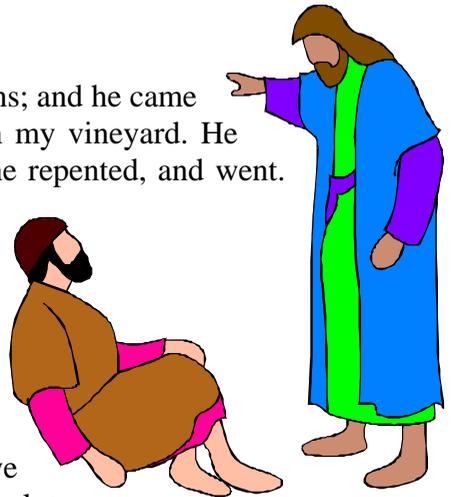
answered Jesus, and said, We cannot tell. And he said unto them, Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things” (Matt. 21:24-27).

Forthwith, Jesus presented the parable of *The Two Sons*. Interestingly, Jesus **again** directed the intended intimidation from himself toward those who confronted him. Our Lord drew the unsuspecting priests and elders into his dialogue and elicited a response from them before they realized that they effectively condemned themselves **again**. Frequently, Jesus fielded similar attacks with the same ease (Matt. 22:15-46). The religious leaders were never able to successfully countermand the authority of the Son of God.

The Jewish rulers had challenged Christ’s authority. His question about John’s baptism and mission having the sanction of heaven or not, or being merely of men, put them on the horns of a dilemma.<sup>2</sup>

### THE PARABLE

“But what think ye? A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to day in my vineyard. He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went. And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not. Whether of them twain did the will of his father? They say unto him, The first. Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him” (Matt. 21:28-32).



Through the parable of *The Two Sons*, Jesus Christ rebuked the religious leaders who came to rebuke him. He even engaged them whereby they participated in their own censure. Being *religious* is not sufficient of itself. A mere appearance of reverence is inadequate. “The Scribes and Pharisees professed zeal for the law, but their profession was like the second son’s promised obedience . . .”<sup>3</sup> The chief priests and elders, of course, as a group, shared this religious posture.

“Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men” (Matt. 15:7-9; Isa. 19:13).

The prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled repeatedly through the religious leaders who, instead of directing the masses to the Christ, tried relentlessly to impede the mission of the

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Messiah. Happily, later “. . . a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7) and an influential Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus, also obeyed the Gospel (Acts 9; 22; 26). For the first decade, the church was comprised largely of Jewish converts, doubtless converted Gentiles who formerly proselyted to Judaism and some Samaritans (Acts 8:5ff; 10-11).

The primary application of the parable was to the two classes of Jews: (1) those who would be saved, and (2) those who refused to be saved. These two classes were present at the preaching of John the Baptist (Matt. 3:1-7). Representatives of the latter group confronted Jesus in the temple and refused to answer our Lord’s question regarding the baptism of John the Baptist (Matt. 21:24-27). Secondly, the parable of *The Two Sons* applies to every accountable soul, again: (1) those who would be saved, and (2) those who refused to be saved.

Religious professors rejected the Word of God, but the outcasts accepted it. The priests and elders were unmoved at the stern preaching of John the Baptist, but great and notorious sinners repented as they listened. The son who said, “I go, Sir, and went not,” was a portrait of the Pharisees, while the other son who said, “I will not: but afterwards he repented, and went,” represented penitent sinners like the publicans and harlots.<sup>4</sup>

The father represents our Heavenly Father, whereas the vineyard represents the church or kingdom Jesus came to establish. Application today regarding the two sons pertains to two categories of accountable souls — the lost and the saved. Repeatedly through direct teaching and illustrations such as this parable, the Bible teaches only two destinies for only two groups of accountable souls. There is no gray area, purgatory or other neutral corner in the spiritual arena. Jesus said, “He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad” (Matt. 12:30).

A beautiful homily unfolds regarding the correlation between the father in the parable and our Father in heaven.

The father, in the parable, had the inherent authority and right to command his sons to “go.” He not only told each son to “go,” but he also told each son (1) WHY to go (work), (2) WHEN to go (today), and (3) WHERE to go (in my vineyard). Likewise, our Father has the inherent authority and right to command His children to “go.” But, He not only tells us to “go,” but He also tells us (1) WHY to go (to make disciples), (2) WHEN to go (now, today, II Cor. 6:2; Jno 4:35), and (3) WHERE to go (into all the world, Mk. 16:15-16). The field is the world. The field is large. The harvest NOW. The laborers are few.<sup>5</sup>

Who are we to resist God’s divine mandates pertaining to our joint mission on earth? We not only have instruction, we have also explanation and the promise of an eternal reward (2 Tim. 4:1-8). Why, then, should we despise God’s plan for man?

The first son in the parable represented the social and religious misfits who, unlike many devout Jews and especially the religious leaders, gladly heard and repented at the

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preaching of John the Baptist. The same respondents sought Jesus, too, while the self-righteous religious guides rejected the Christ, also. “Jehovah is concerned with what we become, not what we were.”<sup>6</sup>

These two sons were meant to illustrate two different types of people. The first son represented the publicans and sinners and harlots. Under the preaching of John the Baptist these profligates, who were rebellious and defied God, repented and obeyed and became sons of God. They had made no profession of obedience. They lived in open sin and were not surprised when men denounced them as hopelessly corrupt. “Publicans (tax-gatherers) and harlots” was a by-word for the wicked of that time. These people were sinners, and knew it. . . . The second son represented the Pharisees, Sadducees and Scribes, who wore the robes and livery of religion, but who were as far from God as the outcasts. Professing to be the Lord’s they were yet “disobedient and rebellious in all the deep facts of their life.” . . . They were outwardly correct and righteous, and were ever ready with a deferential, “I go, sir,” but were destitute of the desire and will to obey.<sup>7</sup>

The first son in the parable represented the people who knew that they needed redemption and when invited into the kingdom repented of their sins.

These wicked persons were the ones on whom the Lord’s teaching made an impact. They drew near Him (Lk. 15:1); many believed on Him (Mt. 21:32), and were baptized (Lk. 3:12; 7:29).<sup>8</sup>

The second son depicted Jews who were blind to their own sins and therefore were offended at a call for repentance. Hence, they showed no interest in redemption and sought to destroy the Prophet who dared to assign sin to them.

This son represents, therefore, that large host of Christ’s would-be followers who profess much and practice little. Many people, like the son, pledge their loyal service to the Master and then fall down on their pledge. From its earliest times the church has always been plagued by this problem.<sup>9</sup>

This parable demonstrates that God’s call is universal. Furthermore, there is urgency attached to the call portrayed in this narration.

The father gave the same command to both of his sons. The terms of obedience are the same for all people. Mk. 16:15, 16; Acts 2:38, 39; Acts 17:30.<sup>10</sup>

It is significant that the father who had only two sons asked each of them to work. God’s call goes out to all his children.<sup>11</sup>

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But the call of the father to his sons had a sense of urgency about it. . . . Yesterday is gone forever, and we dare not boast of tomorrow (Proverbs 27:1). Today is all we have. It is our one chance, our one opportunity to serve.<sup>12</sup>

We learn that each child of the Father has an obligation to serve to the best of his ability — **now!** “(For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.)” (2 Cor. 6:2).

It must have been devastating to the chief priests and the elders along with the Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes to be told that the vile, off-scouring of Jewish society would precede them into the eternal kingdom. The reason for this secondary reception of the kingdom for those *pious* Jews was that the abject sinners more readily repented of their sins. The devout Jews affirmed that they were not sinners, and therefore they refused to repent. In every generation, the most difficult prospects to persuade with biblical truth are those who perceive that they have no need of it.

There are many people who are not teachable. They are not properly concerned about the truth.<sup>13</sup>

There is more hope of those who are consciously wicked than of the self-satisfied. . . . He did not say, “The publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom instead of you,” but “before you,” in front of you. Does not this suggest that all of them could, and some of them would, follow after the saved sinners into the kingdom? Was not Saul of Tarsus, who became Paul the Apostle, one of such?<sup>14</sup>

. . . or take the lead of you, he would indicate that the door of hope was yet open; the others had indeed preceded them, but they might still follow, if they would.<sup>15</sup>

E. The publicans and harlots would enter the kingdom before these leaders. 1. This was because they acknowledged a need for help (cf. Jn. 9:39-41).<sup>16</sup>

The parable of *The Two Sons* also teaches about *biblical* repentance. John the Baptist had called upon the same class of Jews to repent. He indicated that repentance was more than an academic acknowledgment. “Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance” (Matt. 3:8).

Of what did this repentance consist? It was more than simply a twinge of sorrow because he denied his father. He could have grieved much without repenting. When did he repent? Only when he changed his mind, when he turned in the opposite direction, and when he actually went to work in the father’s vineyard!<sup>17</sup>

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“Words without works are worthless (Jas. 1:22; Lk. 6:46).”<sup>18</sup>

No matter how good the intentions, no matter how many the promises, the simple fact is that one son did and one son did not. Fine words can never take the place of fine deeds.<sup>19</sup>

### CONCLUSION

The parable of *The Two Sons* emphasizes: (1) There are only two classes of accountable souls in life and eternity. (2) Superficial religion is useless now and eternally. (3) Accountable souls have the capacity to repent. (4) Repentance involves *activity* in addition to a stated willingness to repent. (5) God the Father will gladly accept everyone who will repent. (6) We have individual accountability before God. (7) Apparent sinners more willingly acknowledge their sins and often will repent. (8) Outwardly religious people are less likely to acknowledge their sins and are more difficult to persuade with God’s Word. (9) It is possible for souls in a covenant relationship with God to sin so as to be lost. (10) Work is required of those who enter the kingdom. (11) God the Father has the unmitigated right to command his children and we have no recourse. (12) Our conduct instead of what we may merely profess will determine our relationship with the Heavenly Father now and eternally.

During the period of Judaism, non-Jews were still amenable to divine, religious law — Patriarchy. Now, however, all people are obliged to submit to the Gospel (Acts 17:30). Everyone now living lives in the Christian Age. There is only one divine message for all accountable souls today (Rom. 1:16). The parable of *The Two Sons* illustrates this principle.

These two sons had the same father, the same instructions, the same opportunities, the same responsibilities, and the same potential blessings. But, only one became obedient to the father’s will. We have the same heavenly Father, the same instructions, the same opportunities, the same responsibilities (to the Father’s will), and the same potential blessings. But these sacred (spiritual) blessings are granted (both present and final) to those who obey Him.<sup>20</sup>

When God created Adam and Eve, he placed them in the Garden of Eden. Though in paradise, God assigned them work to perform (Gen. 2:15). Through the inspiration of God, the apostle Paul affirmed God’s desire that mankind work in this physical world to sustain his family and himself (2 Thess. 3:10). Also, God expects Christians to actively labor in the church (1 Cor. 15:58; Jam. 2:20, 24, 26). This parable demonstrates that the sons of God are expected to work in the vineyard (kingdom) of God.

What did the Father desire his sons to do? He asked them to work in the vineyard. The call from God, then, is a call for men to work. It is not a call to rest and ease. . . . We say that we are Christians, but often we do not spend fifteen minutes during the week working at the job. We say that we are Christians, and yet many times we are too lazy to visit someone who is

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in the death-grip of sin. It must not be forgotten that the Lord's vineyard is a place where work is to be done.<sup>21</sup>

Further, the parable of *The Two Sons* teaches that every accountable soul should expect an *individual* judgment (Ecc. 12:13-14).

The father addressed his sons individually. We are individually responsible for what we do. 2 Cor 4. 5:10, Gal. 6:5.<sup>22</sup>

Therefore, while Jesus is away preparing an eternity for the faithful children of God (John 14:1-3), each of us needs to prepare ourselves for that prepared place (Phil. 2:12). It behooves each accountable soul to examine himself by the Word of God (2 Cor. 13:5) lest we fail the *final test* at the judgment bar of God.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What did the ministry of John the Baptist have to do with the occasion on which Jesus spoke the parable of *The Two Sons*?
2. Explain the efficiency or inefficiency of being religious and appearing reverent.
3. What prophecy was fulfilled by Jewish religious leaders during the ministry of Jesus Christ? Explain how it was fulfilled.
4. What does the parable teach regarding the eternal destinies that await men?
5. What about God's plan for man makes it relatively easy for man to fulfill?
6. Explain what Jesus meant when he told the religious leaders that obvious sinners would enter the kingdom before them.
7. Why are some people not teachable?
8. Describe biblical repentance.
9. What does the parable indicate regarding relatively recent and new sets of instructions in religion?
10. Describe the type of work that God expects his children to perform in the vineyard (kingdom or church) today.

### MORE QUESTIONS

1. Enumerate the events that transpired on Sunday through Tuesday preceding the parable of *The Two Sons*.
2. What, essentially, did the religious leaders do that prompted Jesus to recite this parable?
3. Specifically, who were the religious leaders that confronted our Lord this time?
4. Describe the ethnic background of members of the church in the first decade of its existence.
5. To whom did the parable primarily apply?
6. What is a correct application of the parable today?
7. Who was more readily impacted with the divine message during the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ?
8. Whom does the father in the parable represent?

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9. What does the vineyard represent?
10. Which group of people knew that they were sinners and needed to repent? Who did not believe they were sinners in need of repentance?
11. What does the charge of the father in the parable indicate about the scope of God's call to repentance?
12. What in the parable indicated a sense of urgency in the father's charge?
13. List some of the lessons that can be learned or emphasized in the parable of *The Two Sons*.
14. How can souls today best prepare for the place being prepared by Jesus for the children of God?

### ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Roy Deaver, "The Two Sons," *The Parables of Our Savior*, Indianapolis, Garfield Heights church of Christ, 40.

<sup>2</sup> Lockyer, 222.

<sup>3</sup> Trench, 68.

<sup>4</sup> Lockyer, 223.

<sup>5</sup> Deaver, 54.

<sup>6</sup> Jackson, 32.

<sup>7</sup> Lockyer, 224.

<sup>8</sup> Jackson, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Lightfoot, II, 67.

<sup>10</sup> Roy, 96.

<sup>11</sup> Lightfoot, II, 65.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>13</sup> Deaver, 53.

<sup>14</sup> Lockyer, 224-225.

<sup>15</sup> Trench, 68.

<sup>16</sup> Jackson, 32.

<sup>17</sup> Lightfoot, II, 68.

<sup>18</sup> Jackson, 32.

<sup>19</sup> Lightfoot, II, 69.

<sup>20</sup> Deaver, 53.

<sup>21</sup> Lightfoot, II, 65-66.

<sup>22</sup> Roy, 96.

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# God's Redemptive Plan

## **GOD'S PART**

Love (John 3:16)  
Grace (Eph. 2:8)  
Mercy (Titus 3:5)  
Gospel (Rom. 1:16)

## **CHRIST'S PART**

The Blood of Christ (Rev. 1:5)  
Our Mediator (1 Tim. 2:5)

## **Holy Spirit's Part**

Revelation (2 Pet. 1:20-21)

## **MAN'S PART**

Bible Faith (John 8:24)  
Repentance (Acts 17:30)  
Baptism (1 Pet. 3:21)  
Obedience (Heb. 5:8, 9)  
Purity (Rev. 22:14)  
Faithfulness (Rev. 2:10)  
Love (1 John 2:10)  
Hope (Rom. 8:24)  
Works (Jam. 2:24)  
Endurance (Matt. 10:22)  
Confessing Christ (Rom. 10:9-10)  
Being Born Again (John 3:3-5)  
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