

Parables and Pictures

DON FLEMING

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ISBN 0 947342 48 6

Bridgeway Publications
GPO Box 2547
Brisbane 4001
Australia

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Stories to make us think

The common understanding is that Jesus' parables are pictures and stories that illustrate spiritual truth. In a sense this is true, but Jesus intended them to be more than mere illustrations. He used parables as a way of making people think, and often left his hearers to work out the meaning, see how it applied to them and then act upon it. 'If you have ears to hear, take note.'¹

Jesus knew that among the crowds that followed him, many were more interested in seeing him perform miracles than in responding to his teaching. He told parables to help separate the genuinely interested from the merely curious.

As people heard Jesus' parables, those who thought seriously about them found them full of meaning, and so increased their ability to understand. Those who were not genuine seekers had no interest in thinking about the parables and so turned away from him. As a result, their spiritual darkness became darker, and their hardened hearts harder. They looked, but refused to see; listened, but refused to understand. Their wills would not submit to Jesus, so their minds could not understand his teaching. Their sins therefore remained unforgiven.²

In spite of the negative effect parables had on the idly curious, the basic purpose of a parable was to enlighten, not to darken. A parable was like a lamp, and a lamp was put on a lampstand where it gave people light. It was not hidden under a bowl or a bed where it kept people in darkness. The more thought people gave to Jesus' teaching, the more enlightenment and blessing they received in return. The less thought they gave to it, the less chance they had of understanding any spiritual truth at all.

The principle was the same then as it is now: 'To those who have, more will be given; but from those who have not, even what they have will be taken away.'³

1. Mark 4:9
2. Mark 4:10-12
3. Mark 4:21-25



Sunrise over the Sea of Galilee

Childhood recalled

Jesus had at least four younger brothers and two younger sisters,¹ which meant he grew up in a house of many children. His was not a wealthy home, and he no doubt knew the inconvenience of an entire family sleeping in one room. This is the setting for one of his parables. A family had just gone to bed when a friend knocked at the door to ask food for an unexpected visitor. The owner of the house was annoyed at having to get up at such an inconvenient hour, but because of the friend's persistence he gave the man what he wanted.²

The point of the parable is that if even a tired and unwilling householder could be persuaded by a friend's persistence, how much more would a loving Father respond to the requests of his children. God's children do not have to beg from an unwilling Father.

To reassure people of this, Jesus gave another family illustration. The heavenly Father will not give his children anything less than what is best for them. If they ask for a fish he will not give them a snake; if they ask for an egg, he will not give them a scorpion. They may not always receive exactly what they want (for a wise parent does not give children everything they ask for), but they can be sure he will never give them anything that is inferior or harmful.³

Another illustration that possibly came from Jesus' memories of childhood was that of children playing games in the street. Sometimes they played a lively wedding game, other times a slower funeral game, but there were times when they could not agree on what game to play. The Jews of Jesus' time behaved just like those children. They criticized John the Baptist because he was not 'one of the people', but criticized Jesus because he was too much 'one of the people'. But while the Jews criticized, both Jesus and John were, in their different ways, fulfilling their God-given ministries.⁴

1. Matt 13:55-56
2. Luke 11:5-8
3. Luke 11:11-13
4. Matt 11:16-19



Children, Hebron

The kingdom of God

John the Baptist announced the coming of the king, and when the Lord Jesus began his work he showed that in him the kingdom had come. The world might lie in the power of Satan, but Jesus showed his power over Satan by releasing those who suffered, whether from disease, evil spirits or sin.¹ The Jews had longed for the Messiah's coming, and now he had arrived. Few, however, realized it.

The reason for the Jews' disappointment was their mistaken understanding of the kingdom that Jesus brought. The kingdom of God is the rule of God, or reign of God. It is defined not by a territory, an era or a nation, but by the sovereign rule and authority of God. Jesus showed that when people seek God's kingdom, they seek his rule in their lives; when they receive God's kingdom, they receive his rule; when they enter God's kingdom, they enter the realm where they accept his rule; when they pray for God's kingdom to come, they pray for his will to be done – on earth, as it is in heaven.²

Because the parables of Jesus separated between genuine believers and superficial followers, many of those parables were concerned specifically with the kingdom. As Jesus announced the kingdom, people's response determined whether or not they entered it.

This is seen clearly in the parable of the sower,³ which Jesus pointed out was the key to understanding parables in general.⁴ The different kinds of ground where the seed fell illustrate the different responses that people make to the message of Jesus. Some hear but quickly lose interest; others show a passing interest but give up because they have no deep spiritual concern; others are so worried about their everyday affairs that the message is, in effect, choked dead. Only those who wholeheartedly accept the message are the people of God's kingdom. They give unmistakable proof of this by lives that become increasingly fruitful for God.⁵

1. Matt 3:1-3; 4:17,23-24; 12:28; cf. Col 1:13-14
2. Matt 6:10,33; 21:31; Mark 10:15
3. Mark 4:1-8
4. Mark 4:13
5. Mark 4:14-20



Rich harvest approaching

The fishing net

On one occasion the Lord Jesus told a parable that likened his kingdom to a fishing net thrown into the sea and then drawn ashore. The fishermen then sorted the fish, keeping the good and throwing away the bad. The meaning is that citizens of Christ's kingdom live in a world where the good and the bad exist together. Even among those who profess to be in the kingdom there are the true and false. The only accurate separation will be on the day of judgment.¹

Throughout the time of Jesus' ministry, and indeed through all eras down to the present, people have been drawn towards the Christian way because of what they hoped to gain personally. When Jesus, out of compassion, fed a hungry crowd, many began to follow him, in the hope of getting something more. Jesus knew that their motives were selfish and that they had no understanding of who he was or what he required of his followers. When he explained these things, many turned back from following him.²

Many still think that Christianity is the way to a life that gives them the good things they want and protects them from the troubles they do not want. If that was the case, we might expect all people everywhere to be followers of Christ. When people start to follow and then turn back, the reason is not (as they sometimes complain) that Christianity has failed, but that they have not understood the sort of life it brings.

Many are loosely attached to Christ because they want the benefits that his kingdom provides, but they do not want to be fully committed because of what it might cost. In the end they find that they were never in the kingdom at all – but by then it is too late.³ Christianity is not a social order for a utopian world. It is a way of life that, through Jesus Christ, joins people to the living God and gives meaning to life in a world where things are rarely what we should like.

1. Matt 13:47-50

2. John 6:26,66

3. Matt 13:50



Fisherman mending nets, Turkey

Being anxious and being concerned

Economic success is not necessarily a sign of divine favour (though in some cases it might be¹), and economic disaster not necessarily a sign of divine disfavour (though in some cases it might be²). Prosperity may have resulted from greed or injustice,³ and hardship may have no connection with personal wrongdoing.⁴ Neither prosperity nor poverty is a virtue in itself or a sin in itself.

Jesus pointed out that while greed is obviously a cause of sin, so too is anxiety. His well-known illustrations about God's care of birds, wildflowers and grass are reminders that humans, who are worth infinitely more, need have no cause to doubt him. Believers should not be anxious about the future, whether because of the desire for wealth or the fear of poverty. If they are, they are behaving little better than those who do not know God.⁵

Trouble can arise, however, when believers slip from a state of not being anxious to a state of not being concerned, especially when their own well-being makes them indifferent to the plight of others. Christians who enjoy a good standard of living can easily forget that others live in unrelieved hardship.

In such cases the Christians' lack of anxiety is not because of a healthy faith but because of a healthy bank balance. Their prosperity gives them a feeling of security, but leaves them unconcerned for those who have no such security. The needy are cast upon God, but the well-off have got used to living without him.

This individualistic view of life is part of the consumer mentality that dominates Western society. But Christians should be different. Instead of taking God's daily provisions for granted, they should be concerned for a just distribution of resources so that people of all nations enjoy the benefits of food, clothing, health, housing, work, education and recreation that they themselves enjoy.

1. Deut 28:1-6; 2 Cor 9:10-11

2. Hag 1:9; Luke 6:24-26

3. Isa 3:14-15; James 5:1-6

4. Job 1:8-22; Rev 2:9

5. Matt 6:28-32



Wildflowers by the roadside

Rewards

Some of Jesus' parables speak of rewards God gives people. Such rewards have nothing to do with salvation. Salvation is a gift of God's free grace, not a reward for personal effort. Rewards, by contrast, are concerned with Christian service, though even then people do not deserve them. They have merely done their duty;¹ but, as always, God's grace gives more than anyone deserves.

We should not think of Christ's rewards as if they are prizes handed out after an examination or competition. More likely, they represent the increased capacity that disciples have to enjoy the age to come because in the present age they have built their lives around devotion to Christ and his kingdom.

This is demonstrated in several parables Jesus told. In one parable a businessman gave varying amounts of money to three employees,² and in another parable a prince gave equal amounts of money to ten servants.³ In both stories the people entrusted with the money were to use it to promote their master's interests, and in both stories some did so. The reward that each received was not only in keeping with his success, but was also in proportion to the capacity he had developed to handle further responsibility – and that brought joy to him and his master.

Jesus' followers are to serve him in such a way that his kingdom prospers. As they live wholeheartedly for him, they find that life becomes more worthwhile. Their growing ability to please Christ means that he entrusts more to them, and this increases their capacity to know and serve him. The lazy, however, sink into uselessness. The way people live in the present determines what they will be in the future, for better or for worse.

Neither the threat of penalty nor the promise of reward is the best motivation for right behaviour, but sometimes we are unmoved by anything else. If we were better people, we would respond more readily to the grace of God shown to us in Jesus Christ.

1. Luke 17:10
2. Matt 25:14-30
3. Luke 19:11-27



City business district, Jordan

Wheat and tares

One parable that Jesus' disciples found particularly puzzling was that of the wheat and the tares.¹ A farmer sowed a field with good grain, but while he slept his enemy sowed the same field with tares, or darnel, a wild plant that looked like wheat but was poisonous. When the seeds sprouted and the farmer saw what had happened, he left the two kinds of plants to grow together, rather than risk losing good plants by trying to pull up the bad. After harvest he separated the two, keeping the good and destroying the bad.

In response to the disciples' request to explain the parable, Jesus revealed a truth about the kingdom that in earlier times had not been made known.² In Old Testament times, people expected God's kingdom to come in one mighty act, when God would destroy all national kingdoms and establish his rule throughout the world. That is one reason why Jesus' disciples were perplexed when he did not set up a world-conquering kingdom.

Jesus' ministry demonstrated clearly that God's kingdom was in the world already, though not in the form it will have at the climax of the world's history. As shown in the parable of the seed that fell on different kinds of soil,³ the kingdom is something that people enter voluntarily as they respond to its message. It is not yet forced upon the world with irresistible power. The parable of the wheat and tares reinforces this truth, but reveals something further.

The growth of wheat and tares in the same field shows that the kingdom of God can operate in a world that is under the dominion of Satan, without one kingdom destroying the other. Those who are in God's kingdom live alongside those who are not. In the day of judgment, however, God's kingdom will be established openly and a separation will be made. Believers will be saved and the rest punished.⁴

1. Matt 13:24-30

2. Truths once hidden but now revealed were sometimes referred to as 'mysteries' or 'secrets'; cf. Matt 13: 11.

3. Matt 13:1-9,18-23

4. Matt 13:36-43



Ready for the sickle

Getting the right meaning

If we read each parable in relation to the material before and after it, we can usually find Jesus' purpose in telling it. In some cases the Gospel writer has done this for us. 'Jesus told them a parable to show that they should keep praying and never give up.'¹ Then comes the story of a judge who, tired of a widow's ceaseless pleading, gave a judgment in her favour solely to be rid of her. The point of the story is that if an ungodly judge responded favourably to someone who annoyed him, how much more would God respond favourably to those he loves.

This parable, like many others, shows that we should not try to find meanings for all the details within a parable. Each parable usually has one main point, and the details may be merely part of the story-telling technique. The judge in the above story was ungodly, but to concentrate on this or any other detail would miss or distort the meaning Jesus intended. It could even lead to wrong teaching.

On another occasion Jesus told the story of a businessman who cheated his employer and was about to be dismissed. Not wanting to be left without an income, the man quickly thought of a way to protect his future. He hurried around his customers and did them favours, hoping they might return the favours after his dismissal.² Jesus' purpose in telling the story was not to promote cunning or dishonesty in business, but to urge his followers to be as resourceful in God's affairs as other people are in theirs. In addition, if believers use their material possessions wisely, they will have heavenly riches of permanent value.³

Whatever the main point of each parable may have been, Jesus was inevitably forcing his hearers to a decision. He repeatedly asked, 'What do you think?'⁴ Having thought, they must then decide and, above all, act.⁵

1. Luke 18:1. (Likewise verse 9 explains the purpose of the next parable.)
2. Luke 16:1-8
3. Luke 16:9-11
4. Matt 18:12; 21:28; 22:17; Luke 10:36
5. Matt 18:35; Luke 10:37



Buyers and sellers, Egypt

Looking for fruit

Jesus clearly drew much pleasure from seeing abundant growth in fields, pastures, herds, flocks, vineyards and orchards as he moved around Palestine. Conversely, he was disappointed when he saw barrenness in places where there should have been growth.

On two occasions Jesus taught a lesson from an unfruitful fig tree. The tree, it seems, was a symbol for unfruitful Israel, though Jesus did not specifically say so. In one case the tree had produced no fruit for three years and should have been cut down, but the patient farmer persevered with it for one more year. God had been patient with rebellious Israel, but he was giving it one final chance to repent and accept its Messiah. If not, judgment would fall.¹

In the second fig tree lesson, the tree had plenty of leaves but no fruit. Israel likewise had the outward signs of religion but nothing of spiritual worth. When, at Jesus' word, the fig tree withered, he not only gave a striking display of the power of the word of faith, but also showed symbolically what would happen to Israel when God's judgment fell.²

The grape vine provided a similar lesson, but this time for the professed followers of Jesus. Those who do not abide in him are like branches that are attached to the vine but are dead. The life of the vine, Jesus Christ, is not in them. They bear no fruit and, like dead branches, will be gathered up and burnt.³ This is not what Jesus wants. He wants rather to see healthy life and abundant fruit. All who are spiritually joined to him will give evidence of this by lives that produce the fruits of obedience, love, joy and effective prayer.⁴

Grape vines, however, need to be pruned if they are to remain fruitful. God may have to prune away the dead wood – those sins that hinder fruitful growth – and this may be painful, but he does it in grace because he wants his people to produce more fruit.⁵

1. Luke 13:6-9
2. Matt 21:18-22
3. John 15:1-6
4. John 15:7-11
5. John 15:2



Harvesting olives, Israel

Love of country

It is usually helpful to make a distinction between patriotism and nationalism. When Jesus wept over Jerusalem, he showed that he loved his country and wanted its people to turn to God so that they might find life and escape disaster.¹ He was a patriot in that he wanted the best for his fellow citizens. But love for his nation did not mean he saw its interests as more important than wider issues such as truth, justice and compassion. He was not a nationalist. He did not put loyalty to the nation ahead of all other loyalties.

Most Jews of Jesus' time were passionately nationalistic. They believed that, since they were God's people, God had an obligation to send them the promised deliverer to overthrow Roman rule and restore independence to the Jewish state. When they found that Jesus did not share their nationalistic fervour, they hated him and tried to trap him into making statements that could be interpreted as anti-Jewish or pro-Roman.²

Although the religious leaders hated Jesus because of his criticism of Jews and his generosity to non-Jews, when they wanted to get rid of him they laid accusations that suggested the opposite. They accused him to the Roman governor of being a Jewish nationalist who stirred up the people against the emperor by urging them not to pay taxes and to support him as a rival king.³

When minds are moulded by nationalism, people cannot see the most obvious truth. Jesus showed through his parables and other teachings that most Jews would refuse his invitation to participate in the 'banquet' that represented his kingdom. But when the invitation went to non-Jewish peoples – those 'along the streets and lanes' – the response was so great that they 'filled the dining hall'.⁴ God's blessing was taken from people wanting only a national kingdom and given to those willing to live by the commands of the King.⁵

1. Matt 23:37-39

2. Matt 22:15-22

3. Luke 23:2; John 19:12

4. Matt 22:1-10; cf. Luke 14:16-24

5. Matt 21:43



African church, Malawi

Stirring the conscience

Although Jesus expected people to think about the meaning of each parable he told, he did not always leave them to work out everything for themselves. Sometimes he made a brief comment that drove home the point of the story.

For example, after telling a parable about a rich man who built extra barns to store his wealth but then suddenly died, Jesus said, 'So it is with those who store up everything for themselves, but are poor in the sight of God.'¹ After the stories of the shepherd who rejoiced over a lost sheep and the widow who rejoiced over a lost coin, he pointed out that there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over many who see no need to repent.²

Sometimes, instead of giving a direct answer to a question or criticism, Jesus told a parable and then challenged the hearers to work out the answer. The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin just referred to (and the accompanying parable of the lost son) were told to people who criticized Jesus for being friendly with sinners.³ The story of the good Samaritan was told to an expert in the Jewish law who responded to Jesus' challenge to love his neighbour by asking who was his neighbour. At the end of the story, Jesus got the man to answer his own question – and do something about it.⁴

On one occasion a Pharisee criticized Jesus for allowing a known prostitute to soothe his tired feet. Jesus responded with a parable that told how a debtor who had been forgiven much was more grateful than one who had been forgiven little. This repentant woman had been forgiven a lot and showed her gratitude in the way she knew best. The Pharisee, by contrast, showed no such gratitude. If people do not admit they are sinners, they see no reason to repent, and so have no cause for gratitude⁵. Devotion to Christ is greatest in those who have an appreciation of his forgiving love.

1. Luke 12:21
2. Luke 15:7,10
3. Luke 15:2-3,8,11
4. Luke 10:25-37
5. Luke 7:36-50



Shepherd with sheep

Which comes first?

Two parables tell how people sold everything they owned in order to buy a thing of great value, in one case a treasure buried in a field and in the other an exceptionally fine pearl.¹ The kingdom of God is of such priceless worth, that it may cost people all they have – not just to enter it but to live by its standards.

Jesus was well aware that, to live in this world, people need possessions and money. He did not live as a hermit and he did not expect others to. But neither did he want people to be so bound to this world that their present well-being was their chief concern.

What has happened, however, is that as the centuries have rolled on, many people in developed countries have assumed their way of life to be a Christian heritage, when in fact it is far removed from the kind of life Jesus taught. They have mistaken Western civilization for Christianity. Of all people, they should be the least attached to possessions and money, but instead they have come to see those things as God-given treasures that are theirs by right.

Life in the kingdom of God is eternal, and the part of it lived in the present world is but a prelude to a much fuller life – the real life for which human beings were made. That is why Jesus urged people to pay the price of sacrificing their comfort and convenience, because such things can never compensate for losing the only life that is worth having.²

Jesus does not want us to opt out of life in the present world, nor to be so engrossed with its material benefits that we miss its essential purpose. If we put first the things of God and his kingdom we shall find that other things become ours as well.³ But if we put these ‘other things’ first, we shall find they cheat us. Not only shall we miss out on them, but we shall also miss out on the kingdom. We lose our soul, our life. And once we lose that, there is nothing we can give in exchange for it.⁴

1. Matt 13:44-46

2. Mark 8:36

3. Matt 6:33

4. Mark 8:37



Comfortable living

Things that alarm

When Jesus warned his disciples about the coming destruction of Jerusalem, he linked this event with his return in power and glory.¹ The two events would not happen at the same time, but one would foreshadow the other.

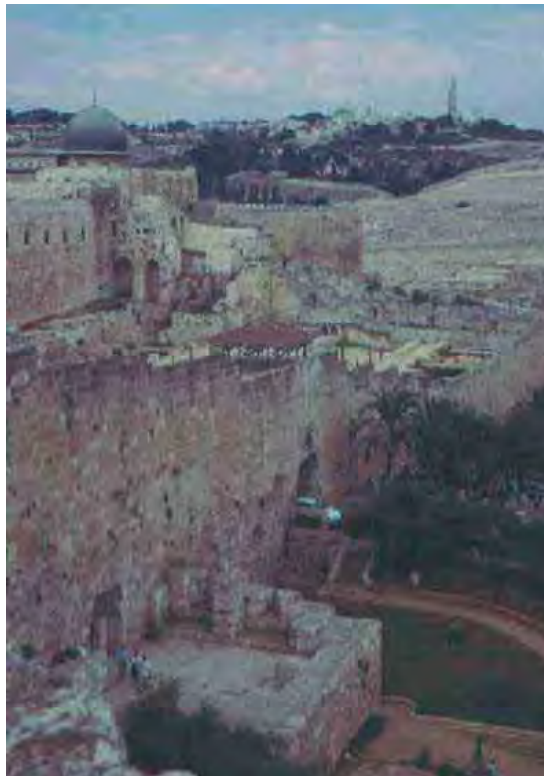
The first of these two events would take place within the lifetime of the disciples. They would have a good indication of its approach through the appearance of false messiahs, severe persecution and the advance of the Roman armies. Just as the first leaves on a fig tree indicated summer was coming, so these signs would indicate that destruction was about to come upon Jerusalem.²

However, the disciples were not to believe every rumour they heard. Nor were they to be alarmed every time they heard of wars, famines or earthquakes. 'The end is not yet,' said Jesus; though he added that such things marked the beginning of increased suffering.³

The words of the Lord Jesus, as always, counsel us against error at one extreme or the other. We are not to be alarmed but neither are we to be complacent. Because a longsuffering God does not always act in sudden judgment, we may be tempted to think that things are no worse than they have always been. But the lack of a recent divine intervention does not mean there will be none in the future.⁴

In much of the world today, fear grips people as it did the Jews during the years leading up to Jerusalem's destruction. This is often more the case in apparently peaceful nations than in those immersed in conflict. The concern for security has become an obsession throughout the developed world, as if people who reject the spiritual feel they must hang on to the material instead. They say to themselves, as in another of Jesus' parables, 'You have ample insurance against calamity'; but, asks God, 'When the day of reckoning comes, what use will it be?'⁵

1. Matt 24:1-31
2. Matt 24:32-34
3. Matt 24:4-8
4. 2 Peter 3:3-10
5. Luke 12:19-20



City walls, Jerusalem

What we do or don't do

Leadership may have been one issue in Jesus' mind when he told the parable about a man whom the master put in charge of his household while he was absent.¹ But the longer the master was absent, the more independent the manager felt, till he became arrogant, bossy and self-pleasing. When, without warning, the master returned, the crooked manager was exposed for what he was and punished accordingly. His so-called service for his master had been service for himself.

Like the man in the story, the Jewish leaders of Jesus' time misused their power over God's people, were unprepared for the Messiah's arrival, and fittingly fell under his condemnation. The parable is also a warning to church leaders during the period between Jesus' ascension and return. In its wider sense the parable applies to all God's people. They deceive themselves if they think they can live selfishly and still receive their master's approval. Their master will return at a time they do not expect, and therefore they must be honest, open, industrious and alert at all times.

Jesus' disciples were slow to grasp the truth that he was to leave the world for an unknown length of time and then return, so he told three further parables. These parables – about ten girls going to a wedding, three traders using entrusted money, and a shepherd separating sheep from goats – demonstrate how those who have prepared themselves for Jesus' return will enter his kingdom with joy, but those who have not prepared will suffer distress too awful for words. The three stories illustrate three reasons for such failure: thoughtlessness, laziness and indifference.²

Whereas the self-serving manager missed out on the kingdom because of what he did, the people in these other three parables missed out because of what they failed to do. The girls took no oil for their lamps, the merchant did not trade with his funds, and self-centred people were unconcerned at the suffering of others. In due course the Lord came, but by then it was too late to do anything.

1. Matt 24:45-51

2. Matt 25:1-46



Cana, in the hills of Galilee

The doctor and the sick

Some people today comment patronizingly about Jesus Christ that he was a good man, a great moral teacher, a promoter of non-violence or an example of the forgiving spirit. They do not want to associate openly with him or his followers, but they like to think kindly towards him.

In Jesus' time few held such neutral views. Most were either for him or against him. If they did not love him, they hated him. Either they responded to him with devotion or they tried to kill him.

Jesus did not fit the picture of what religiously respectable people wanted in a religious leader. He was a poor man from a humble background, he had not been educated in the Jewish religious schools, and he sought no honour for himself. He found his friends among ordinary villagers rather than influential leaders. And among those attracted to him were disreputable members of society such as tax collectors, swindlers, adulterers and prostitutes.

Religious people, whether in Jesus' time or the present, are usually respectable people, and they might understandably be critical of those who are blatantly unprincipled or immoral. But they should not be critical when Jesus or his followers befriend such people.¹

The illustration Jesus used in responding to his critics was that a doctor works with those who are sick, not those who are well. Jesus mixed with these people, even ate with them in their homes, because they were spiritually and morally sick and desperately needed his help.²

Jesus had one more word for his critics – and for any others who cannot understand those who work as he did: 'God desires mercy more than sacrifice.'³ God is more pleased with the ministry of mercy shown to the despised than with the religious exercises of those who think they are superior.

1. Matt 9:10-11
2. Matt 9:12
3. Matt 9:13



He found his friends among ordinary villagers

More than optimism

Optimists can at times be an inspiration. While pessimists dampen enthusiasm by thinking too much about what could go wrong, optimists bring encouragement by looking to the future with confidence. At times, however, their confidence may come more from wishful thinking than from realistic understanding.

There were plenty of optimists among the crowds who followed Jesus. They thought he was on the way to a throne, but in fact he was on the way to a cross. Jesus therefore warned them not to be carried away by false hopes. If they followed him, they had to be prepared for all sorts of sacrifices – livelihood, family, friends, even life itself.¹ To emphasize the point, he gave two short illustrations.

In the first illustration, Jesus told of a farmer who had impressive plans to build a large tower (probably as a storehouse and lookout). If, however, the man did not have the funds to complete the project, the partly built structure would be a monument to his failure.² Those who want to follow Jesus must consider the cost.

The second illustration concerned a king who launched an ambitious assault on an enemy. If, however, he did not first estimate whether he had the troops to be successful, he would be forced to surrender and accept whatever terms the enemy demanded.³ As in the case of the farmer, the man's humiliation would be his own fault. His optimism may have inspired his troops, but it was not balanced with a sensible assessment of all that was involved.

Any who want to become followers of Jesus Christ must first consider what they are committing themselves to. Jesus does not want to scare people away from him, but neither does he want them to attach themselves to him without realizing what he may require of them. And the sacrifices he asks his followers to make are merely reflections of the greater sacrifices he made.

1. Luke 14:25-27

2. Luke 14:28-30

3. Luke 14:31-33



A king's preparation against siege – water tunnel, Megiddo

The Son of man is coming

Most people do not take seriously the prospect of Jesus' return. When media presenters use the words 'second coming' in relation to unimportant people or events, their words reflect an unspoken ridicule of a precious Christian belief. For most people, if they think at all about the second coming, it is probably with the same vague optimism they have about an afterlife in a heavenly utopia.

In keeping with this, many see the advances of the modern world as progress towards the final triumph of human ingenuity over all difficulties. Others are not so easily impressed. They see no reason for the human race to boast that it has made the world better or its inhabitants happier. For them, the world seems to be heading not towards paradise but towards catastrophe.

The Bible makes it clear that human beings, being made in God's image, have a capacity for the unlimited, but because of sin they have used this capacity to usurp the place of God. Jesus illustrated this from the flood of Noah's day. People ignored God's warnings of judgment and went about their daily lives as if God did not matter. Then the flood came and swept them all away.¹

In giving this illustration, and the accompanying illustration about the person whose house was broken into while he slept, Jesus three times warned that he would return unexpectedly. 'No one knows the hour . . . you do not know what day . . . the Son of man is coming when you do not expect.'²

To those who ridicule the second coming, Jesus gives the picture of sudden intervention when some are saved and some lost. Two men are working in the field, or two women working at home, but one is taken and the other left.³ To those, on the other hand, who think they have to work out when to expect the second coming, Jesus says he is coming when they do *not* expect. His command is to be ready always.



Farmers, Jordan Valley

1. Matt 24:37-39

2. Matt 24:36,42-44

3. Matt 24:40-41

