

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

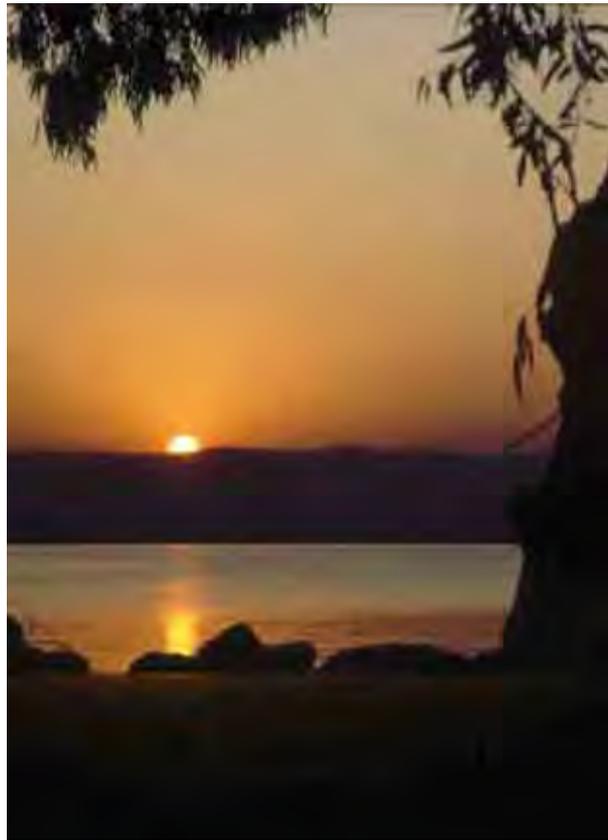
In spite of the negative effect parables had on the idly curious, the basic purpose of a parable was to enlighten, not to darken. A parable was like a lamp, and a lamp was put on a lampstand where it gave people light. It was not hidden under a bowl or a bed where it kept people in darkness. The more 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

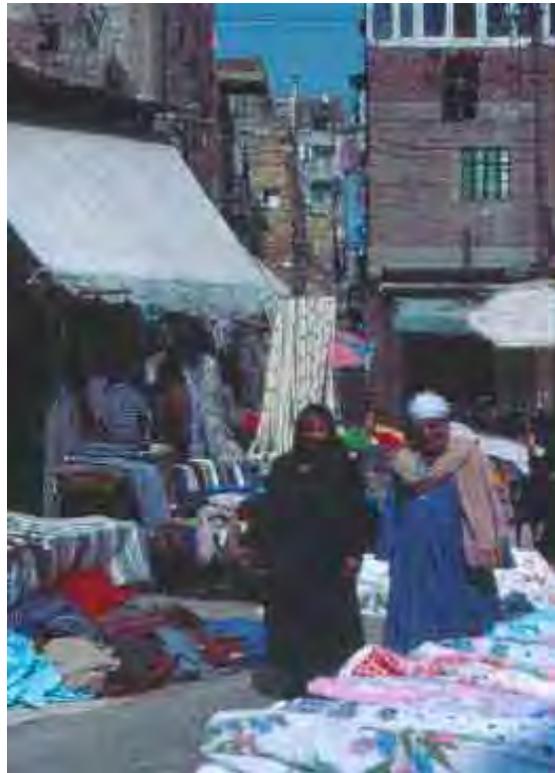
If we read each parable in relation to the material before and after it, we can usually find Jesus' purpose in telling it. In some cases the Gospel writer has done this for us. 'Jesus told them a parable to show that they should keep praying and never give up.'¹ Then comes the story of a judge who, tired 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.

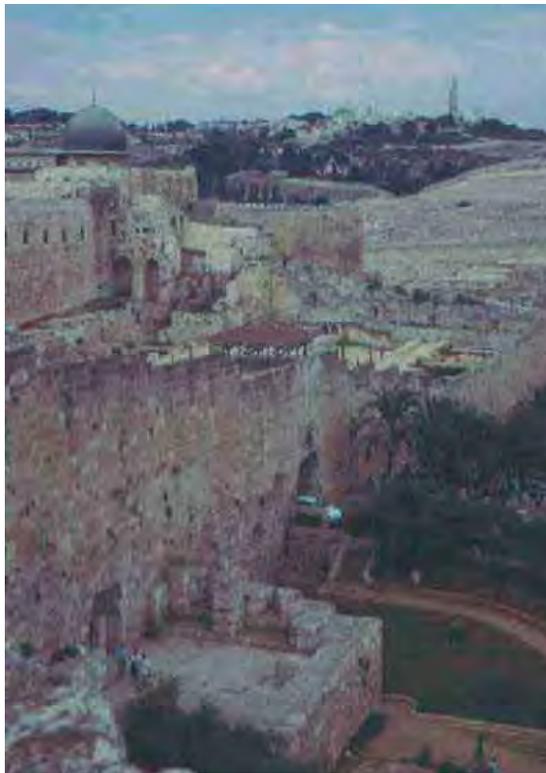
The first of these two events would take place within the lifetime of the disciples. They would have a good indication of its approach through the appearance of false messiahs, severe persecution and the advance of the Roman armies. Just as the first leaves on a fig tree indicated summer was coming, 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.

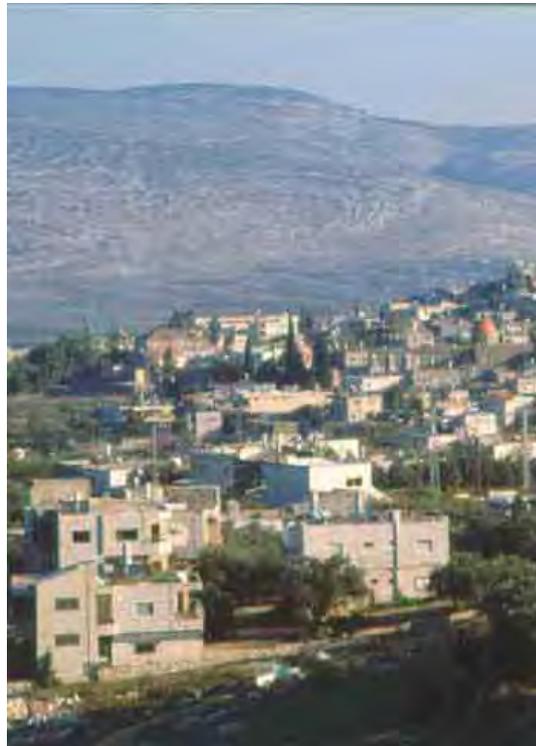
Like the man in the story, the Jewish leaders of Jesus' time misused their power over God's people, were unprepared for the Messiah's arrival, and fittingly fell under his condemnation. The parable is also a warning to church leaders during the period between Jesus' ascension and return. In its wider 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

Strong man; stronger man

The Lord Jesus was constantly confronted with evil in the world, but he offered no explanation of its origin – other than to point out that a sinful heart produces sinful behaviour.¹ Rather than debate the wider philosophical question of the origin of evil, he was concerned with the *conquest* of evil. And that should be the aim of his followers, whether in conquering personal temptation or in dealing with the suffering of mind and body that sin has produced in the world. In both cases Jesus Christ showed the way.

Jesus did not accept the popular Jewish notion that linked a person's suffering with that same person's sin.² He recognized, however, that suffering comes from the power of evil in the world, and the one who exercises that power is known as Satan, the Devil, Beelzebul, the prince of demons and the prince of this world.

In view of this, Jesus' activity of healing the sick and the demonized was not only a ministry of compassion but also a campaign against the powers of evil. In the words of his own illustration, he entered the house of the 'strong man' Satan, tied him up and plundered his goods. Through Jesus, the captives of Satan were set free.³

Those whom Satan had once kept in bondage through evil spirits were now free; or, to use another of Jesus' illustrations, their house was now cleansed. But if they did not fill the empty house with better things, worse demons might return to occupy it. People benefited from Jesus' healing power, but if they did not submit to him as Messiah and Lord, they could find themselves in a worse state than they were previously.⁴

If faith is concerned solely with getting rid of the past, it is not healthy. The forgiveness of former sins is no guarantee of future security. Genuine believers add to their faith virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection and love.⁵

1. Mark 7:21-23; cf. Luke 6:43-45

2. John 9:1-3

3. Matt 12:25-29

4. Matt 12:43-45

5. 2 Peter 1:5-7



Pool of Bethesda, scene of healing

Unseen, but active

Jesus grew up in the hills of Galilee and clearly loved the rural countryside around him. References to fields, plants, trees, pastures, vineyards, crops, birds, animals and weather recur throughout his teachings. And with these references was his warm acknowledgment that this was his Father's world. Grass and wildflowers made the landscape attractive, but it was God who made them grow. People observed the sky and so forecast rain or sunshine, but it was God who sent the rain and controlled the sun.¹

Besides looking beyond natural causes to the unseen activity of his Father, Jesus had a keen interest in the natural world as it appeared to those who lived and worked in it. He had an eye for detail. This is seen in obvious examples such as the parable of the sower and the parable of the wheat and tares, but even more clearly in a lesser known parable in the same group.

In this parable the focus was on the steady, even unseen, growth of the seed, regardless of whether the farmer was working in the field or sleeping at home. Jesus traced the seed's development – it was sown, it sprouted and it grew. He observed that first came the tender stalk, then the young ear and finally the full ear of grain. The farmer then put in the sickle and reaped.²

The earth, not the farmer, germinated the seed and produced the plant – stage by stage, quietly but with certainty. The earth produced 'of itself', though how it did this was something the farmer could not explain.

Once again God is the unseen worker in nature, and in a similar way he is the unseen worker in the kingdom. Just as the farmer must wait patiently for the soil to react with the seed to make the plant grow, so the messenger of the gospel must wait patiently for God's message to do its work in people's hearts. The process may be slow, but it is certain. The farmer may not be able to make the seed grow, but he can provide the conditions in which it can grow.

1. Matt 5:45; 6:28-30; Luke 12:54-55

2. Mark 4:26-29



Observe the sky, forecast the weather

Food and drink

The Lord Jesus had a natural way of turning the common affairs of life to his own use, in order to convey a message that people needed to hear. He used everyday things to make people think about issues of eternal significance.

On one occasion, when Jesus was tired and thirsty, a woman drew water from a well to refresh him. In the conversation that followed, Jesus helped the woman see her true need, which was not for water from a well but for the water of life. The woman may have been slow to understand, but she at least began to see that, just as water satisfied natural needs, so Jesus could satisfy spiritual needs. She saw that Jesus was unique, and soon she brought others to him.¹

Next it was the disciples who were slow to understand. When Jesus said he had food of which they knew nothing, they thought he meant physical food. Jesus meant rather that his deepest satisfaction was not through eating heartily, but through doing his Father's will.² That should be cause for deep satisfaction in any human being, but most people prefer to seek satisfaction in the things they can see, make, do, buy or earn. 'By bread alone'³ is their motto.

Nevertheless, Jesus knew that human beings need food to live, and he even worked a spectacular miracle to ensure that five thousand hungry people were not sent away with empty stomachs. But he explained that food alone cannot sustain human life as God intended it. Jesus is the bread of life, and only as people spiritually partake of him will they receive the life that is proper to them.⁴

If people do not receive eternal life, the reason is not that God has hidden it from them. It is that they have not sought it; they have not hungered and thirsted for it. Eternal life is available, and Jesus promises that those who seek will find.⁵

1. John 4:7-15,28-30
2. John 4:32-34
3. Matt 4:4
4. John 6:1-13,27-29,47-51
5. John 6:35; cf. Luke 11:9-10



Arab bakery, Jerusalem

The prodigal son

Few stories in any literature can compete with The Prodigal Son.¹ It is the best known of all Jesus' parables and has been the subject of more sermons than any other. But while we are moved by the father's love, we should not forget that originally the story was a rebuke to those who criticized Jesus for befriending sinners.²

As the story unfolds, Jesus forces his hearers to recognize two contrasts. One is the contrast between those who thought they had done everything right (the brother who saw no need for repentance) and those who knew they were sinners (the brother who asked only for mercy). The other is the contrast between the love of God (the father's welcome to the rebel) and the harshness of the Pharisees (the elder brother's anger at such a welcome).

Even today many good-living people are scarcely different from the elder brother. They wish God would have nothing to do with blatant sinners: 'Give them what they deserve.' They prefer to see sinners punished than to see them repent and be forgiven. But God welcomes such people. More than that, he goes looking for them.

It is easy to condemn wrongdoing, but not so easy to respond with love. Yet that is what God does. The parable gives no theological explanation of how God does this,³ for that is not its purpose. No parable deals with the entire body of Christian truth, though every parable illustrates something. What this parable illustrates is that God loves those who are unworthy of his love, and when they repent he restores their relationship with him.

Another parable about a father and two sons further contrasts the repentant and the self-righteous. When a father sent two sons to work in the field, one at first disobeyed but later went, while the other said he would go but did not. When disobedient people repent they enter God's kingdom, but when self-righteous people give nothing more than lip service, they are left out.⁴

1. Luke 15:11-32

2. Luke 15:2,7,10,32

3. On the basis of Christ's atoning death; Rom 3:23-26; 5:8

4. Matt 21:28-32



Spring and trough for watering farm animals

From small beginnings

Anyone looking at the small group of Jesus' unremarkable followers could never have imagined that from them would come a movement that has changed the world. God does great things from small beginnings. This is illustrated in two short parables Jesus told.

In the first of these parables, a tiny mustard seed grows into a large tree where birds come and nest.¹ From its apparently insignificant beginnings, Jesus' kingdom has covered the earth and become home to people of all nations. In the second parable, a small piece of yeast spreads through a lump of dough.² Again, the small group of Jesus' followers marked the beginning of a kingdom that spread through the entire world.

Elsewhere in his picture-teaching, Jesus used seed to symbolize the work of Satan in sowing poisonous weeds in a good field, and used yeast to symbolize the corrupting effects of sin.³ But in the two brief parables we are currently considering, the message is one of confidence and encouragement.

Many of those who followed Jesus were labelled as knowing nothing, ignorant, uneducated, powerless and undistinguished, but from them Jesus built a church that has withstood all the forces of evil and brought life and liberty to people everywhere.⁴

Not only in the global scene but also in local and even individual affairs, God is still bringing great things out of small beginnings. Here is a reminder never to be discouraged by the apparently insignificant effect of things we do for God. He, through the power at work within us, can do far more than anything we could ask or think.⁵

1. Matt 13:31-32

2. Matt 13:33

3. Matt 13: 38-39; Luke 12:1; cf. Matt 16:11-12

4. John 7:48-49; Acts 4:13; 1 Cor 1:1:26-27; cf. Matt 16:18

5. Eph 3:20



To all nations – country church, Thailand

Sheep and goats

Christians are at times criticized for being impractical when facing the realities of life; of being 'so heavenly minded they are no earthly use'; of being concerned only with 'pie in the sky when they die'. Unbelievers, we are told, are more down to earth.

If that were so, we might expect the unbelievers to be passionately concerned with making the world a better place for all the victims of disease, hunger, disasters, war and oppression, while the Christians ignored such things and simply gazed heavenwards. In fact, the opposite is often closer to the truth. Those who believe that life consists of more than earthly well-being are the ones who want to make the earth a better place to live. Those who believe that earthly life is all we have are the ones most likely to pursue its benefits for themselves regardless of the needs of others.

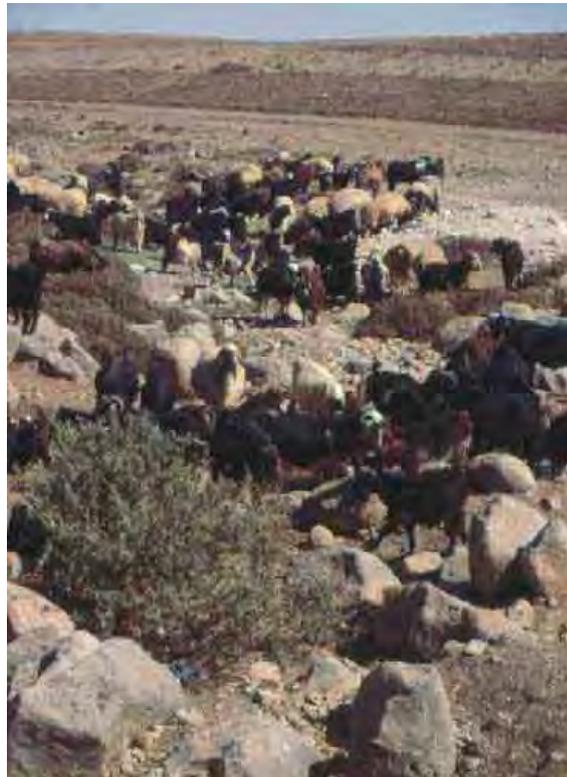
Many who criticize Christians also criticize the social order. They are angry at injustice and may fight for worthy causes. But few will sacrifice the comforts of their society to dedicate their lives to difficult and unglamorous work, such as care for the diseased in the slums of a poverty-stricken country.

Across the world, the contribution of Christians to humanitarian work is disproportionate to their numbers. In India, for example, Christians constitute only 2.3% of the population, but provide 25% of care for orphans and 30% of care for the handicapped and lepers.

In view of these statistics, people may take pride in calling them-selves Christians, but in the parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus warns that in the coming judgment many of these people may be in for a shock.¹ The work of some in the name of Christianity does not excuse the apathy of others. Jesus so identifies himself with the poor, the hungry, the homeless and the lonely that he sees a lack of love to them as a lack of commitment to him. He also sees any kindness done to them as kindness done to him.² An unexpected reward awaits those who are unconscious of their charitable acts.

1. Matt 25:31-46

2. Matt 25:40,45



Sheep and goats

Two people who prayed

One reason why many people do not receive the life God offers is that they want to contribute something to it. They do not want to put themselves in the place of a helplessly guilty sinner who can do nothing but ask for mercy. They feel that at least they should do something to impress God and so gain his acceptance. The Lord Jesus showed the futility of such thoughts by telling a story about a Pharisee and a tax collector who went to the temple to pray.¹

Salvation has never come through a person's good works. The only way anyone has ever been saved is by God's grace, and the person accepts that salvation by faith.² That was why God accepted the tax collector but not the Pharisee. The tax collector confessed his wrongdoing and asked for mercy. The Pharisee recounted his good deeds and expected God would be pleased with him. After all, he had done his religious duty.

The story is not saying that God prefers bad deeds to good deeds, but it is saying that God prefers repentance to boasting. The Pharisee, unaware of his failures, merely congratulated himself on his achievements. But his self-satisfaction was more negative than positive. He was particularly proud of the things he had *not* done. Unfortunately, even today many religious people (churchgoers) are better known for what they do not believe in than for what they do believe in. But negative religion is not attractive to the public, and it certainly does not impress God.

God wants people to do good, though not as a way of gaining forgiveness. When people are forgiven, however, they should have a natural desire to do good. Even then, those who do the most good are often the ones who are least aware of it. They may, in fact, be more conscious of their failings, because of the high standard they have set themselves. They realize also their constant need for God's grace, and may be encouraged that he constantly gives more grace.³

1. Luke 18:9-14

2. Eph 2:8-9

3. James 4:6



Today's Jews praying at the Western Wall, Jerusalem

Expecting the master

Fear takes many forms. In some cases, where people give in to weakness because they are frightened of what others might say or do, fear is blameworthy. It is little different from cowardice. But in other cases fear may be praiseworthy. People are careful about what they do, because they fear the disastrous consequences of carelessness. Lives or property can be damaged when people are foolishly fearless. They have been reckless when they should have been cautious.

Jesus told a number of parables about the owners of large properties who left home for a time and then returned. In some stories the absent owners left their business affairs in the hands of trusted servants, but in one story there was no entrusted business, because the owner had simply gone to a wedding. The servants just carried on their normal household duties and awaited the master's return that night.¹

In this story the servants had no dread of their master, though they respected him enough not to want to disappoint him when he arrived home. So they made sure the house had a welcoming atmosphere and kept themselves fully prepared for the master's return. In a similar way, Christians are to be fully prepared for Christ's return, though mixed with their joyful anticipation is a healthy fear. He is, after all, their master.

Whether the master returns earlier or later than expected, he will be pleased to find his servants ready and waiting for him.² The parable even gives a glimpse of an unexpected reward Jesus may give. Although the servants in the story had merely done their duty, the master treated them to a surprise meal.³ A generous God rewards those who serve him loyally with no thought of reward. Those who fear him receive his grace in ways they never expected.

1. Luke 12:35-36

2. Luke 12:38

3. Luke 12:37



Rural prosperity, Galilee

Something new

When we are living in a particular environment, we usually have difficulty in understanding anything that is completely different. We may think we understand it, but mostly we see it within the framework of our existing culture, religion or opinion.

This was the case with Jews in the time of Jesus Christ. They realized there was something different about his teaching, but many could only interpret it within the framework of their existing Jewish religion. They wondered, for example, why Jesus and his disciples did not keep Jewish traditional practices relating to fasting, Sabbath-keeping and ritual cleansing.¹

As he often did, Jesus responded to questions by giving illustrations. The Jewish religion was like an old worn-out coat, and he had not come to put a new patch on it. It was like an old brittle wineskin, and he would not put new wine in it. He had not come to repair, improve or update Judaism. What he brought was entirely new, and it could not be contained within the old system.²

The disciples were slow to understand this, and only after the Lord's resurrection did they begin to see the full significance of his life and death. Previously timid, they were now bold. Though once dull and confused, they were now enlightened and confident. Even then, however, neither they nor the populace in general understood that Christianity could not be contained within Judaism – until Stephen saw it clearly and proclaimed it boldly. The Jews' response was to kill him; and immediately a sharp division opened up between those who were for Christianity and those who were against it.

People like a religion they feel comfortable with.³ If they see Christianity as something that can be accommodated to existing religious, cultural or social values, they very likely have not understood it clearly. Those who truly belong to Jesus Christ are 'a new creation'; the old has passed, the new has come.⁴

1. Mark 2:18; 3:1-3; 7:1-5

2. Mark 2:21-22

3. Luke 5:39

4. 2 Cor 5:17



St Stephen's Gate, named for the first Christian martyr

Blessed are the merciful

One Old Testament command that Jesus repeated in various forms was that we should love our neighbour as ourselves. We should help others enjoy the kindnesses of life that we like to enjoy.

Sad to say, we are invariably much kinder to ourselves than we are to others. For example, we see an intemperate outburst as righteous anger when it comes from us, but as bad temper when it comes from others. When we take an inflexible position, we are 'standing on principle', but when others do so they are 'pig-headed' or 'stubborn'. We justify behaviour in ourselves that we criticize in others. In Jesus' words, we are quick to see a speck in someone else's eye, but cannot see the log in our own.¹

Because of this bias towards ourselves, we are slow to offer the forgiveness to others that we should like for ourselves. The Lord Jesus told a parable to the effect that we cannot expect forgiveness from God if we have not forgiven others. In Jesus' story, a king forgave a servant a huge debt, but the servant refused to forgive a fellow servant a small debt. When the king heard of this, he withdrew his forgiveness.²

Whatever wrong others may have done to us, it is almost nothing compared to the wrong we have done to God. But how can we ask God to forgive us if we do not forgive others? In the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, he made it clear that we can only ask his forgiveness of our wrongdoings against him if we have forgiven the wrongdoings of others against us.³ It is the merciful who receive mercy.⁴ By contrast, the severe invite severity. For better or for worse, our treatment of others establishes a standard by which God judges us.⁵

1. Matt 7:3-5
2. Matt 18:21-35
3. Matt 6:12
4. Matt 5:7
5. Matt 7:2



Living with the threat of debt

Getting involved, despite the risks

Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan in response to the question, ‘Who is my neighbour?’¹ The answer to the question is to be found not in a specific definition but in the overall lesson of the story. Anyone in need is my neighbour.

For those whose ‘faith’ is merely obedience to certain rules of behaviour, Jesus drove home this lesson by means of some sharp contrasts. In his story, a man travelling from Jerusalem down to Jericho was attacked, robbed and left for dead beside the road. Two religious officials passed by the man. Though loyal to their nation and religion, they had no compassion. A Samaritan, by contrast, stopped and helped the man. Though despised as being of mixed race and mixed religion, he acted as a genuine neighbour should.

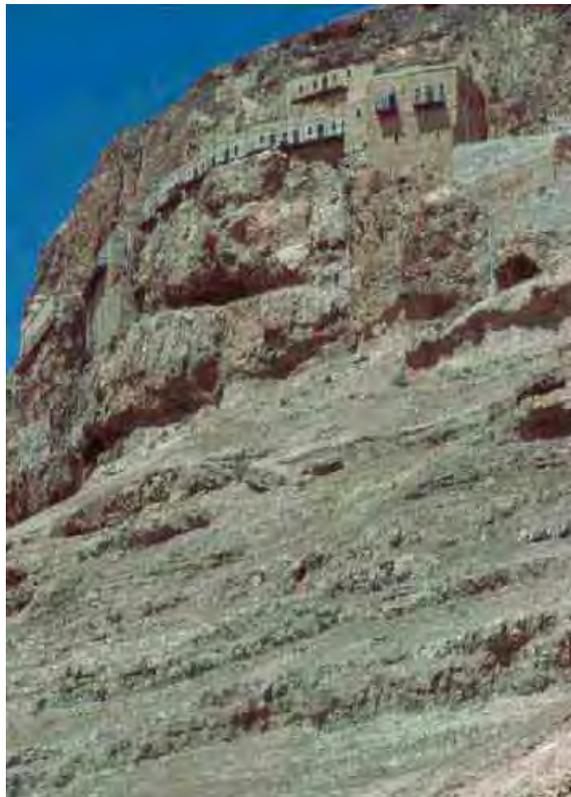
Perhaps all three men felt pity for the unfortunate victim, but if pity was no more than a feeling, it was practically useless. The only worthwhile pity resulted in action.

The religious officials knew that the law of Moses taught love for others,² but saw no connection between the teaching in the Bible and the man by the roadside. They might be likened to those who can look at a map of a town but cannot relate the map to the town itself. They see lines drawn on paper and think they know where to go, but when they are actually trying to find their way, they cannot relate the markings on the map to the real-life setting. They cannot translate theoretical ideals into practical action.

Some people have this trouble with the Bible. They have an inability to relate its ancient teaching to present-day circumstances. They meet situations where they do not do what they should, because they cannot see the connection between the teaching they believe and the action they should take. Often they feel it prudent, certainly safer, not to get involved. But to practise what Jesus taught will usually expose us to an element of risk, and will invariably require us to do what is inconvenient and perhaps unwelcome.

1. Luke 10:29-37

2. Lev 19:18,33-34; Deut 24:17-18



Monastery above Jericho, off the road from Jerusalem

The appearance and the reality

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, a number of pictures focus attention on the need to examine where our lives are going. Jesus has dealt with the sort of life required of those in his kingdom, and now he shows that overall there are only two ways, a broad way that leads to destruction and a narrow way that leads to life. The first is easy and popular, because it imposes no restrictions. The second is hard and unpopular, because it requires self-denial for his sake.¹

One reason why people miss the way to life is that they are easily influenced by those whose views sound reasonable but are not based on the radical sort of life Jesus taught. The promoters of these views appear harmless, but that only makes them the more dangerous, especially since their views give approval to the commonly accepted lifestyle; and most people prefer the accepted lifestyle to the radical. To them the opinion-makers seem as harmless as sheep, but actually they are as dangerous as wolves. Or to change the picture, the fruit they produce is harmful, because it comes from a bad tree.²

But people cannot just blame others for deceiving them. Many deceive themselves. They attach themselves to Christ's followers, and perhaps call themselves by his name, but if they have never had a revolution in their lives through a personal encounter with Jesus, they too will finish in the place of destruction. Even doing Christian work is no substitute for allowing Christ to change their lives.³

To illustrate this point, Jesus spoke of two men who each built a house. Both houses looked good, but after they were hit by a storm, only one remained standing, the reason being that its foundation was solid. This illustrates those who respond to Jesus' teaching and do what he says. The house that was destroyed illustrates those who hear what Jesus says but do not act upon it. They think they are safe, but they are not. Whether the storm of testing is in the present life or the final judgment, it will reveal who are Jesus' true followers.⁴

1. Matt 7:13-14
2. Matt 7:15-20
3. Matt 7:21-23
4. Matt 7:24-27



Good tree, good fruit

Presumption

In the parable of the absentee landowner,¹ Jesus departed from his usual practice and used the parable as a sort of allegory. Instead of the parable as a whole illustrating one or two main points, each part of the parable represented something. The sequence of events in the parable reflected the sequence of events in Israel's response to God.

A landowner planted a vineyard, secured it well, equipped it with a winepress, let it out to tenants and then went to live for a time in another country. Jesus' hearers would readily identify God as the landowner and Israel as the vineyard, because these were familiar Old Testament pictures.² The tenants were the nation's religious leaders, appointed to look after the vineyard. But when the owner sent his messengers to receive the fruits of his investment, the tenants rebelled violently, sometimes by attacking and other times by killing the messengers. This was what Israel did to God's messengers, from Moses to the prophets to John the Baptist.

Finally, the owner sent his son, but the tenants, instead of giving up the fight and submitting, became more rebellious. They killed the son – which was what the Jews were about to do to Jesus Christ.

The owner had been patient for so long that the tenants thought they could do what they liked without fear of his intervention. They were in for a shock. The owner destroyed them and gave his vineyard to others. When the Jews understood what Jesus was saying, they became so angry that they tried to kill him.³ They could not believe that they had forfeited their special privileges and that the despised Gentiles would now become the trustees of God's vineyard.

There is a lesson here for the Gentiles also, especially those of European origin, because over the past two thousand years they have presumed upon God's blessings just as Israel did over the previous two thousand years. This is an invitation to disaster. God, in his time and his way, deals with those who take him for granted, and still entrusts his vineyard to whoever he chooses.

1. Mark 12:1-11

2. Isa 5:1-7

3. Mark 12:12



Winepress

God's invitation

Luke's Gospel records an occasion when Jesus had a meal in the home of a prominent Pharisee. One thing he noticed was the way people manoeuvred themselves towards the prominent positions in the seating arrangements. With boldness that might seem surprising for such an occasion, Jesus warned the guests against ambition. God gives the chief places to the humble.¹

Jesus noticed that the host also could benefit from a few words of caution. The man should invite not just those who could return the favour, but also those who had no way of returning the favour. The man's reward would be at the great feast in the coming kingdom.²

This mention of the kingdom prompted one guest to offer his contribution to the subject of the kingdom: 'Blessed is he who shall feast in the kingdom of God'.³ It was a bland statement, but it gave Jesus the opportunity to tell a parable to people who assumed they were in God's kingdom but were not. And the reason they were not was that they refused the invitation presented to them in Jesus.

Jesus likened the kingdom to a feast where the host invited many guests. All made excuses for not attending, with the result that the host sent invitations to unlikely people outside the privileged circle. There was a great response – picturing the Gentiles' acceptance of the message that the Jews rejected.⁴

In Matthew's variation of this parable, the host is a king and the feast is a wedding banquet. But there is an added detail about a guest who had no wedding garment. People from many backgrounds were invited to the feast, but when they entered they had to wear the clothes given to them.⁵ The lesson is that people may accept God's invitation as they are, but they may not remain as they are. All may enter God's kingdom, but acceptance of God's invitation involves faith, repentance and a changed life.

1. Luke 14:7-11
2. Luke 14:12-14
3. Luke 14:15
4. Luke 14:16-24; see comments on page 12
5. Matt 22:11-14



Albanian Christians reaching out to Kosovar refugees

Shepherds

When we think of the Lord Jesus as the good shepherd, it is usually in a spirit of devotional worship for the one who gave his life for the sheep. No one forced him to do this; he did it willingly, out of love for those who have no hope of salvation apart from him.¹

However, when Jesus first used the illustration, he was contrasting his leadership with that of the Jewish rulers – elders, scribes, priests, teachers and others. From Old Testament times, Israel’s leaders had been referred to as shepherds, but in most cases they were bad shepherds.² The same was true in the time of Jesus. The Jewish leaders had just thrown a blind man out of the synagogue because he refused to call Jesus a sinner for healing him on the Sabbath day. Jesus was contrasting their treatment of the man with his. Whereas they expelled the man, Jesus went and found him and led him to complete faith.³

The Jewish leaders, instead of being good shepherds who cared for the flock, were greedy shepherds who exploited the flock. Like thieves they robbed it, like wolves they destroyed it, and like hired labourers they worked only for their own profit.⁴

The healed man recognized this in their treatment of him, but recognized the work of a true shepherd in Jesus’ treatment of him. He knew Jesus, and Jesus knew him. In contrast to the Jewish leaders, Jesus was willing to sacrifice everything for the sake of his sheep, even to the point of being killed for them – something that was rapidly becoming likely because of the opposition of the Jewish leaders.⁵

Church leaders are also shepherds of God’s people, and their model should be taken from Jesus, not from the Jews. But if they take the sort of risky action he took, they can expect the sort of response he received. They can, however, expect also to share in his ultimate victory.⁶

1. John 10:14-18

2. Num 27:17; Isa 56:11; Jer 50:6; Ezek 34:2-6; cf. Matt 9:36

3. John 9:13-17,24-39

4. John 10:8,10,12,13

5. John 10:14-15,19-20,27-28,31

6. Acts 20:28-29; 1 Peter 5:1-4



The rugged world of an Eastern shepherd

When indifference is deadly

Jesus once told a story about a rich man and a beggar who lived in the same street. The rich man lived comfortably and ate well, but when he died and entered the afterlife he got a horrible surprise. He discovered he had missed out on heaven, and nothing he did could now change things. The beggar also died, but he, by contrast, was now enjoying God's heavenly feast.¹

The point of the parable was not that rich people go to hell and poor people go to heaven. Rather the story illustrated what Jesus had just been teaching about certain people who built lives of personal comfort and prosperity.² They believed in God, joined regularly in public worship, and thought their well-being was an indication of God's blessing. They respected Scripture as God's Word, but no longer heard its message. Self-interest had made them insensitive to its message and unaware of others.³

Social, religious and economic systems change from one country or era to another, but wherever there are human beings, there we shall find self-interest. In recent generations we have been warned against the dangers of materialism – first capitalism, then consumerism, now globalization – but Christians, like human beings in general, are skilled at justifying their lifestyle. At times their attitudes are no different from those of the people around them.

We do not know whether the rich man in Jesus' story was a scoundrel, or the beggar an innocent victim. For all we know, the rich man might have accumulated his wealth in legitimate ways, and the beggar might have landed in his sad condition through his own folly. That is not the concern of the parable. The point is that when people need help, the professedly religious should not ignore them, no matter what sociological, economic or political argument they can raise. A refusal to be moved by another's need can mark the beginning of a path that ends in disaster.

1. Luke 16:19-26
2. Luke 16:14: 'the Pharisees, who were lovers of money'
3. Luke 16:27-31



Houses of the wealthy, Nazareth

Generosity that upsets people

Human beings often display a built-in resentment when they see kindness shown to those who, in their opinion, do not deserve it. But when God exercises his love to the repentant, he does so on the basis of his grace, not their deserts.

Jesus illustrated this by telling a story about a landowner who hired people to work in his vineyard for an agreed amount. At several times during the day he hired additional workers, and at the end of the day he paid everyone. When the first lot of workers found that he gave all workers the same amount, they complained. They felt they deserved more. The man replied that he had paid them the amount agreed upon, and if he paid others the same, that was his concern. The discontent arose not because of any wrongdoing in the landowner, but because of jealousy in the all-day workers.¹

In the time of Jesus, the Jewish teachers of the law were angry that Jesus welcomed disreputable Jews like tax collectors solely because of his mercy on the repentant. In the time of the early church, other Jewish leaders were angry that Christians welcomed converts from heathenism straight into the full blessings of the kingdom. Jews who for generations had worshipped God and studied his law resented his mercy being poured out on people who had not worked as they had. Foreigners received equal blessing with Jews, regardless of their background.²

Similar attitudes are still around today, among unbelievers and believers alike. When people think only of what they feel they deserve, they lose sight of grace. Those in wealthier countries may resent the arrival of those from poorer countries who receive equal benefits with them. Respectable people may be annoyed when mercy is shown to those they despise. Believers of long-standing may even think it unfair that death-bed conversions lead to the same eternal bliss for which they have waited a lifetime. But God is generous in grace – and he is the model for his people.

1. Matt 20:1-16

2. Acts 10:34-35,47; 15:1-2



Carriers waiting to be hired, Nepal

Bringing light to the world

Jesus announced himself as the light of the world.¹ Because of sin, the world is a place of darkness, and Christ came to bring light. He urged the people of his day to walk in the light that shone through him, and the Christian preachers who followed him urged their hearers likewise.² The followers of Jesus Christ must reproduce the sort of righteousness and holiness seen in him.

Not only must the followers of Jesus reproduce his character, but they must shine God's light into a dark world as he did. They now become, in his words, the light of the world.³ Just as a lamp is put on a stand where it gives light to all in the room, so Christians must live and work in places where they actively spread the light of God to others.

A lamp is useless if it is put beneath a bed or under a tin can, and Christians are useless if they hide themselves away in places where they cannot shine God's light to others. They should be, to use another picture, like a city on a hill – something bold and prominent that cannot be hidden.

In a further picture Jesus likened his followers to salt – something that on the one hand preserves from corruption and on the other enhances flavour. But salt must be put in the right place if it is to do its work. It must be put in food, not thrown on the ground. Christians must make sure they are living and working in places where they can do the job God wants them to do. They must also maintain their Christian effectiveness, their 'saltiness'; otherwise they might as well be thrown away.⁴

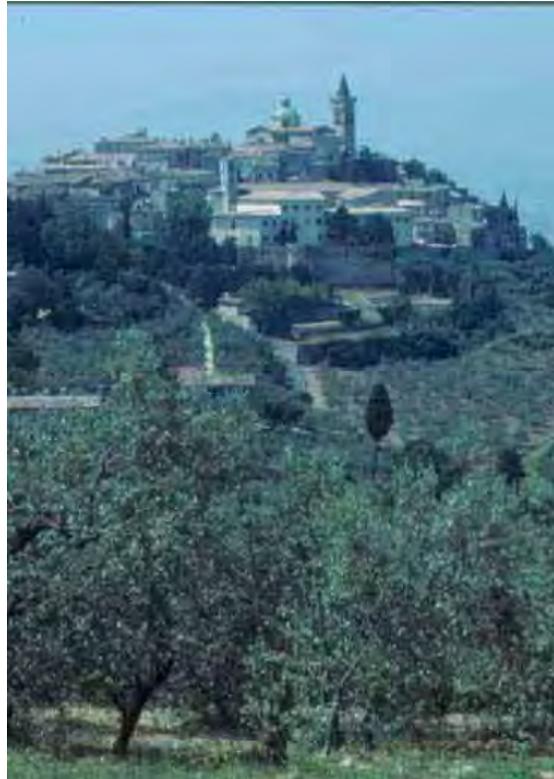
Jesus was fully involved in the society of his day, even though there was much in it he did not agree with. But he maintained his holiness and at the same time illuminated the darkness with the light of God. He wants his followers to do the same.

1. John 8:12

2. John 12:35-36; Eph 5:8-9; 1 Peter 2:9; 1 John 2:9-10

3. Matt 5:14-16

4. Matt 5:13



City on a hill, Italy

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