

PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

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All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. 2 Timothy 3:16.

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INTRODUCTION

The Kingdom of God

If you were asked to summarize the main points of the gospel, what would you say? Surely you would focus on the sinfulness of all men and their guilt in God's sight. You would tell how Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man, came to earth to live a perfect life for us and to die for us, bearing our sin and guilt. You would say that God forgives our sin, justifies us, and gives us a new life through faith in Christ alone, completely of his grace. You would speak of the hope of heaven that those who repent and turn to Christ possess.

But would you say anything about the kingdom of God? The kingdom of God is a more prominent feature of the gospel message than many evangelical Christians realize. It was the first thing Jesus preached when he began his public ministry:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

Mark 1:14-15

Here, at the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus ties the kingdom of God to the gospel. Do we think of the gospel as the gospel of the kingdom? Or do we focus on the forgiveness of sins, the new birth, and the hope of heaven to the virtual exclusion of the truth that our salvation is part of God's work in establishing his kingdom? It is because the kingdom of God is at hand, because God will establish his reign in its fullness over heaven and earth, doing away with all evil and wickedness and blessing the righteous, that the gospel is good news for sinners who are not fit in themselves for the kingdom.

If we look for mention of the kingdom of God in the Bible, we find that twenty-two of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament contain at least one reference to the kingdom of God. The gospels of Matthew and Luke devote the most space to it.

The gospel of Matthew will claim most of our attention in this series of studies. Matthew's gospel is different from the other New Testament books in two respects. First, two-thirds of Matthew's references to the kingdom refer to it as the kingdom of *heaven*, a phrase used nowhere else in the New Testament. It needs to be said that the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God are one and the same. The dispensationalist interpretation of the Bible makes the terms refer to two quite different kingdoms, but it can easily be shown that the dispensationalist interpretation is wrong.

Second, Matthew's gospel differs from the other gospel accounts in that many of Matthew's references to the kingdom of heaven are found in parables. Those parables—fifteen in all—are the subject of this study, along with one parable of the kingdom found in Mark and two in Luke, parables not found in Matthew.

Why parables?

A parable is a short story conveying a spiritual lesson, often using common things to symbolize spiritual truth. In the Gospel of Matthew the Lord Jesus teaches his disciples about the

kingdom of heaven in parables, beginning with a sermon containing seven parables in chapter 13. Although Jesus is speaking to the crowds in Matthew 13, his teaching is meant for his disciples. For that reason he delivers his teaching in parables:

Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: “You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.” For this people's heart has grown dull and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.’ *Matthew 13:10-15*

Much later, while he was eating the Last Supper with his disciples, he promised to send the Holy Spirit to lead his disciples into all truth:

“These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. *John 14:25-26*

All Christians are his disciples, and the teaching conveyed by the parables is for us as well as for the first disciples. Nevertheless, like the Twelve, we don't always grasp the meaning of the Lord's parables. The disciples had to ask the Lord to interpret the Parable of the Sower for them. He did that and also explained the Parable of the Weeds. He left uninterpreted the five shorter parables spoken on that occasion.

Interpreting parables

We who have the Holy Spirit *can* interpret and understand these parables. In doing so we ought to keep several principles of interpretation in mind.

1. Parables usually have one basic, central point. Trying to find multiple meanings in a parable, or to over-symbolize a parable by finding significance in every person, event, or thing may keep us from seeing the forest for the trees. For example, some interpret the birds in the Parable of the Mustard Seed as evil in the church. There is no reason to do that; the birds have a role related to the central point of the parable. Their presence doesn't relate to a second, independent point.

2. The central point may have several aspects. The Parable of the Sower exemplifies this. There is only one main point, but it is illustrated by four cases. The main point of the parable is that the word of the kingdom only bears fruit when it falls on good soil, that is, a good heart. But the parable describes several kinds of soil—human hearts—that are not able to bear fruit: hard hearts, shallow hearts, preoccupied hearts. By recognizing the hearts that do and do not respond with saving faith we understand better the mystery of why some people believe and others do not.

3. The first step in interpreting a parable is to try to identify what each element represents.

For example, in interpreting the Parable of the Weeds, when we know what the sower, the field, the good seed, the bad seed, the enemy, the reapers, and the harvest stand for, the meaning of the parable is plain.

We should not, however, assume that a particular entity always represents the same thing in all parables. For example, seed represents the Word of God in the Parable of the Sower, but it represents the children of the kingdom in the Parable of the Weeds.

4. Other parables may help you to interpret the parable at hand.

For example, the Parable of the Weeds (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43), which the Lord interpreted, helps us understand the Parable of the Net (Matthew 13:47-50). The Parable of the Weeds tells us that the world contains good and evil people, whom the angels will separate on the Day of Judgment. Evildoers will be cast into fiery punishment while the righteous will be gathered into the Lord's kingdom. This is the very message of the Parable of the Net. In the Parable of the Net the wicked are represented not as weeds but as bad fish, the righteous are not wheat but good fish, the angels are not reapers but fishermen, the Day of Judgment is not harvest time but the sorting out of the fish on the shore, the fearful doom of the wicked is a fiery furnace—here both parables use the same image—and the lot of the righteous is not being gathered into the Lord's barns, but being put in containers for keeping.

None of these principles applies to every parable. Like the proverbs in the Book of Proverbs, one must be able to recognize exceptions.

Jesus interprets two parables

The Lord gave us an example to follow in the interpretation of parables by interpreting the Parable of the Sower and the Parable of the Weeds. Let's take a look at his interpretations.

The Sower: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

The parable is given in Matthew 13:1-9 and interpreted in Matthew 13:18-23. Read the parable first; then consider the interpretation, which is summarized below.

The seed represents the word of the kingdom (v. 19). It falls on four different kinds of ground, with four different results:

1. The path represents a person who does not understand the Word (compare v. 4 with v. 19). The birds (v. 4) represent the evil one, i.e., Satan (v. 19), who snatches the Word away. In other words, people who hear the Word and don't get it soon forget it: Satan snatches it out of the mind. Do we not see this process at work today?

2. The rocky ground (v. 5) represents people who are impulsive but shallow (v. 20). They hear the gospel and get all excited, but when the sun gets hot they dry up and shrivel away (vs. 5-6); that is, when opposition or persecution arises because of the gospel they fall away from the faith (v. 21). The faith of such people is not deeply rooted; it is only a temporary faith, not a saving faith, and cannot survive persecution for Christ's sake.¹

3. The thorny ground (v. 7) represents a person preoccupied by the concerns of this world and led away by the deceitfulness of riches (v. 22). The cares and temptations of life choke the

1 The person represented by the rocky ground is like Pliable in *Pilgrim's Progress*.

word, and it never produces fruit, i.e., eternal life. Don't you know people like that? They hear the Word, perhaps growing up in a Christian home, but the allurements of the world and its troubles combine to push any interest in following Christ out of their life.

4. The fourth kind of ground is good soil. The soil is good in that the person hears and understands the Word (23). The Word takes root and grows, producing a good crop (v. 8). Jesus doesn't say what that fruit is, but he makes that clear in the Parable of the Weeds: it is membership in the kingdom of heaven. In other words, when the Word has its intended effect it produces Christians.

This parable tells us to expect that the gospel message—the word of the kingdom—will only receive a positive response from some. Others, for the reasons brought out in the parable, do not have hearts able or ready to receive it. We should not be surprised or disheartened when our witness bears no fruit.

The Weeds: Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

The parable is given in Matthew 13:24-30 and interpreted in Matthew 13:36-43. Read the parable first; then consider the interpretation, which is summarized below.

In interpreting the parable Jesus identifies the various persons, things, and events in the parable. When we know what those elements represent we have a full understanding of the parable. That will prove to be the case for many of the parables.

The sower is the Son of Man, i.e., Jesus himself. The field is the world; the good seed represents the sons of the kingdom, identified also as the righteous in v. 43. (Note that the seed does not represent the word of the kingdom as in the Parable of the Sower.) The weeds are the sons of the evil one, i.e., Satan's subjects, and the sower of the weeds is the devil himself. The harvest is the end of the age; the reapers are the angels. The gathering and burning of the weeds represents the judgment and eternal punishment of the wicked. The end of the righteous is glory in the eternal kingdom of God.

There's nothing left to interpret. Once we have identified the elements of the parable we have a full understanding of it. That will prove to be the case for many of the parables.

The scope of our study

We begin with the Parable of the Seed Growing, recorded in Mark 4, before we look at the parables in Matthew and Luke.

In Matthew 13 we'll focus first on the five short parables of the kingdom that the Lord told by the seaside: the Parable of the Mustard Seed, the Parable of the Leaven, the Parable of the Hidden Treasure, the Parable of the Pearl of Great Value, and the Parable of the Net.

The other kingdom parables in Matthew were told by the Lord in the weeks before his crucifixion: the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant in chapter 18, the Parable of Laborers in the Vineyard in chapter 20, the Parable of the Two Sons in chapter 21, the Parable of the Tenants in chapter 21, Parable of the Wedding Feast in chapter 22, the Parable of the Fig Tree in chapter 24, the Parable of the Ten Virgins in chapter 25, the Parable of the Talents in chapter 25, and the Parable of the Ten Minas in Luke 19. Also, in conjunction with the Parable of the Wedding Feast in Matthew 22, we will study the Parable of the Great Banquet in Luke 14.

The gospels contain other parables, but we'll confine our study to the kingdom parables.

For each parable, we begin with some questions to help us focus on its essential elements. Answers to the questions follow. We conclude with an exposition of the parable.

EARLY PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

The parables in Matthew 13 were delivered near the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus spoke them all on a single day to a crowd gathered on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. But before we look at the kingdom parables in Matthew 13, we consider a parable spoken on the same day which is recorded only in Mark. It seems Jesus told it after he told the Parable of the Sower but before he told the Parable of the Mustard Seed.

The Seed Growing: Mark 4:26-29

Questions

1. Who does the sower represent?
2. What does the seed represent?
3. The seed grows by itself, without the aid of the sower. If the sower is the Son of Man, as in the Parable of the Weeds, how do we interpret this fact?
4. When the grain is ripe the man harvests it. What does the harvest represent?
5. Every one of Jesus' listeners knew that a farmer harvests the grain once it is ripe. What is the figurative meaning of this fact?

Answers

1. Who does the sower represent?

The sower may represent the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, as in the Parable of the Weeds, or he may represent an evangelist or preacher of the gospel. See the exposition.

2. What does the seed represent?

The seed represents either the word of God or the children of the kingdom. See the exposition.

3. The seed grows by itself, without the aid of the sower. If the sower is the Son of Man, as in the Parable of the Weeds, how do we interpret this fact?

See the exposition for two possibilities.

4. When the grain is ripe the man harvests it. What does the harvest represent?

The harvest represents the end of the age.

5. Every one of Jesus' listeners knew that a farmer harvests the grain once it is ripe. What is the figurative meaning of this fact?

The fact that the man puts in the sickle as soon as the grain is ripe suggests that the harvest will not be delayed. The Lord will return as soon as the time is right, when the full number of the elect have been saved.

Exposition

We would be prone to identify the sower as Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, as in the Parable of the Weeds, except for the fact that the sower “knows not how” the seed grows. (Mk. 4:27). Surely the Son of Man is also the Son of God, or God the Son. God is all-knowing, all-powerful. What does it mean that “he knows not how” his church grows? A Jewish farmer in the first century AD, as described in the parable, would not know how seed grows into plants, but how could God the Son be ignorant? Jesus Christ is in heaven while the crop grows to harvest. Whatever may be the limitations he assumed when he emptied himself and became man (Philippians 2:7), they are no longer present in the glorified Son. Should we then identify the sower as a preacher of the gospel who sows the seed? That would account for “he knows not how.” However, the farmer also puts in the sickle when the harvest is ready; surely that is the Lord of the harvest, the Son of Man who sowed the seed in the Parable of the Weeds.

There isn’t much more we can say about the fact that “he knows not how.” Perhaps the phrase is there in recognition that *we* know not how the gospel does its work. *But the statement that “he knows not how” is not the central theme of the parable.* The main point is that it is not by human effort—for example, military conquest and forced conversion—that the kingdom grows. It is the secret work of God. He has chosen a people for his Son, and one by one they are added to the kingdom by the action of the Word. We know not how God works in human hearts to bring forth new life, repentance, and faith. We don’t understand why some turn to Christ and others don’t; but we know that it is God’s unobserved and unobservable work that builds his kingdom.

As to whether the seed is the Word of God or the children of the kingdom, it is best to see the *seed* as the Word of God but the harvested *grain* the seed produces as the children of the kingdom.

The Parable of the Growing Seed has features in common with the Parable of the Weeds, but the differences are significant enough to show that they are different parables, not different accounts of the same parable. *The main point of the Parable of the Growing Seed is that God does the hidden work of bringing people to faith and building his church.* By contrast, the main point of the Parable of the Weeds is that there are false Christians in the world whose behavior is so much like that of Christians that even the angels could confound them at first, though at the return of Christ it will be clear who are the Lord's and who are children of the devil.

The Mustard Seed: Matthew 13:31-32

Questions

1. Who does the man who sows the grain of mustard seed represent? Note that Jesus told this parable immediately after the Parable of the Weeds, which he interpreted in vs. 36-43 (pp. 7-8, above). Let his interpretation of that parable suggest the answer to this question.
2. What does the seed represent? Again, let the Lord's interpretation of the Parable of the Weeds suggest the answer to this question.
3. What does the field represent? Once more, let the Lord's interpretation of the Parable of the Weeds suggest the answer to this question.
4. What is the significant fact about the growth of a mustard seed?
5. What is the main point, the take-away from the parable?

Answers

1. Who does the man who sows the grain of mustard seed represent? Note that Jesus told this parable immediately after the Parable of the Weeds, which he interpreted in vs. 36-43 (pp. 7-8, above). Let his interpretation of that parable suggest the answer to this question.

The man represents Jesus, the Son of Man. There is really no other possibility in light of the answer to Question 2, below.

2. What does the seed represent? Again, let the Lord's interpretation of the Parable of the Weeds suggest the answer to this question.

Jesus tells us that “the kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard.” In this case the seed is not the Word of God, as in the Parable of the Sower, nor is it the children of the kingdom, as in the Parable of the Weeds. It is the kingdom of heaven (which, to be sure, results from the sowing of the Word, which produces the children of the kingdom.)

3. What does the field represent? Once more, let the Lord's interpretation of the Parable of the Weeds suggest the answer to this question.

The field represents the world.

4. What is the significant fact about the growth of a mustard seed?

The significance is that it starts very small and grows very large.²

5. What is the main point, the take-away from the parable?

Just as the mustard seed grows very large from a very small beginning, so it will be with the kingdom of heaven.

Exposition

When Jesus told this parable, the event it describes was yet to come. For us today it is already well underway. The Lord Jesus has planted his kingdom in the world. It started out small, just eleven disciples and a handful of other followers, but it has grown and will continue to grow until it is bigger and greater than all other kingdoms. Its growth and its ultimate supremacy over the kingdoms of the earth remind us of the stone cut out by no human hand in King Nebuchadnezzar's dream, recounted in Daniel 2:

As you looked, a stone was cut out by no human hand, and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, all together were broken in pieces, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth. *Daniel 2:34-35*

And again, from the Book of Revelation:

² The mustard plant here is *Salvadora persica*, a tree found in Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. It grows to ten feet or more high.

Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.” *Revelation 11:15*

The truth that the kingdom of God will start out small but will grow to a great size should give us renewed hope and confidence in the midst of our difficulties. It must have encouraged the apostles as they undertook the Great Commission:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” *Matthew 28:19-20*

Some commentators find a second point in the parable. They interpret the birds that make their nests in the branches as wickedness that would find its way into the church as it got big and powerful.³

I don’t believe the Lord introduced the birds into the parable to make that point. I believe he brought the birds into the parable *to illustrate the main point*, which is how large the kingdom of God would become in spite of its small beginning. A mustard plant grows up to be a woody tree able to support the weight of birds.

Birds in a tree are used to make the same point in a dream God gave King Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel tells the king:

The tree you saw, which grew and became strong, so that its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth, whose leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in which was food for all, under which beasts of the field found shade, *and in whose branches the birds of the heavens lived*—it is you, O king, who have grown and become strong. Your greatness has grown and reaches to heaven, and your dominion to the ends of the earth. *Daniel 4:20-22*, emphasis added.

Jesus’ disciples knew the Book of Daniel. They would have recognized that the birds in the tree were a sign that the mustard seed had become a great tree.

More than indicating the size of the tree, the presence of the birds in the mustard tree also tells us that the kingdom of heaven is a place of blessing where people can dwell happily and securely. The psalmist speaks of this:

Beside them the birds of the heavens dwell; they sing among the branches. *Psalm 104:12*

To be sure, the Parable of the Weeds indicates that wickedness is found in the kingdom of heaven. But wickedness was present in the church from the first century, long before the church was large and important—long before the new, tender plant became a tree.

³ The church is the manifestation of the kingdom of heaven on earth in the present age. See the Parable of the Net.

The Leaven: Matthew 13:33

Questions

1. Leaven is yeast in one form or another.⁴ What is the function of leaven in baking? Ask a baker if you don't know.
2. The parable doesn't say how much leaven was used. How much yeast or starter is used in baking a normal batch of bread (say, two loaves)? Again, ask a baker.
3. The "three measures" of flour amounted to about 36 liters or nearly 38 quarts. The resulting volume of bread would be about twice that, about 76 quarts. That's a lot of bread! How does the quantity of leaven compare with the quantity of bread dough produced?
4. The leaven corresponds to the kingdom of heaven (Jesus said that.) What corresponds to the three measures of flour?
5. Based on your answers to the above questions, what is the point or message of the parable?
6. How does the point of this parable relate to the point of the previous Parable of the Mustard Seed?

⁴ In our day the word *leaven* usually refers to powdered yeast, but in biblical times it was likely a small piece of moldy bread, containing yeast, which had been saved from a previous batch of bread.

Answers

1. Leaven is yeast in one form or another. What is the function of leaven in baking? Ask a baker if you don't know.

Leaven makes the bread dough rise.

2. The parable doesn't say how much leaven was used. How much yeast or starter is used in baking a normal batch of bread (say, two loaves)? Again, ask a baker.

According to one website, the quantity of yeast amounts to one-half of one percent of the quantity of flour. That would amount to about a teaspoon of yeast for a kilogram of flour.

3. The "three measures" of flour amounted to about 36 liters or nearly 38 quarts. The resulting volume of bread would be about twice that, 76 quarts. That's a lot of bread! How does the quantity of leaven compare with the quantity of bread dough produced?

As indicated in Answer 2, above, it only takes a very small quantity of yeast to make a lot of dough rise. "Three measures" of flour would require 36 teaspoons; that's about 6 ounces of yeast for 72 pounds of flour. That would make perhaps ten days-worth of bread for a large family. Bread was a major component of people's diet in biblical times, the "staff of life."

4. The leaven corresponds to the kingdom of heaven (Jesus said that.) What corresponds to the three measures of flour?

The flour corresponds to the world.

5. Based on your answers to the above questions, what is the point or message of the parable?

The point is that the kingdom of heaven starts very small, but eventually will permeate the whole world.

6. How does the point of this parable relate to the point of the previous Parable of the Mustard Seed?

The two parables seem similar, but actually make different points. The Parable of the Leaven tells us that the kingdom of heaven, though starting small, will spread throughout the whole world. The Parable of the Mustard Seed tells us that the kingdom of heaven will grow to be very large.

Exposition of the Parable

The Parable of the Leaven tells us that the kingdom of heaven, inserted into the world, though small, permeates the entire world. That is not the point made by the Parable of the Mustard Seed. The Parable of the Leaven does not simply reiterate that the kingdom of heaven grows large from small beginnings. A thing may grow large without filling much space (think a redwood tree—a giant redwood does not occupy even a building lot of ground) and a thing may fill a space without necessarily growing large (think of one drop of food coloring in a quart of water).

The point of the Parable of the Leaven is that *the kingdom of heaven will penetrate the entire world.* As the Lord commanded his disciples in the Great Commission:

Go therefore and make disciples of *all nations*, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. *Matthew 28:19, emphasis added.*

The Apostle John received a vision of the fulfillment of this truth:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, *from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages*, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands. *Revelation 7:9, emphasis added.*

The truth of the universal spread of the gospel is validated by Christian history and by what we see happening in the present day.⁵ The gospel, and with it the church, the present manifestation of the kingdom of heaven, is making great inroads in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Old barriers are falling, and the word of Christ is coming to places where it has never been heard; the church is being established in places where it never had a foothold before and also in places where it once existed but was wiped out by the Evil One.

This truth is a source of great encouragement to Christians, especially as we see parts of the world that remain closed to the gospel. The Lord assures us by this parable and by other Scripture that the kingdom of heaven will penetrate regions that have no gospel witness and no church of Christ. That assurance should move us to pray and support endeavors to enter every closed and barren area.

A number of Bible commentators, recognizing that leaven is sometimes a figure of evil in Scripture (e.g., 1 Corinthians 5:6-8), interpret this parable differently. To them the main point is that evil will spread throughout the church as the years and centuries roll on. I believe this interpretation to be wrong. Christ said that the kingdom of heaven is like the leaven, not the flour. The flour represents not the church in this parable, but the world.⁶

Other parables support the interpretation given here. In the Parable of the Weeds the sons of the kingdom are sown in the world (represented by the field); in the Parable of the Mustard Seed the kingdom is planted in the world. Here the leaven is put into the flour. It is the leaven, not the flour, which represents the church or kingdom of heaven.

5 Jesus later taught this truth plainly in the so-called Olivet Discourse, Matthew 24:14.

6 Similarly, in the Parable of the Weeds, although Jesus clearly says that the field is the world, some interpreters apply it to the church. While there certainly has been wickedness in the church from the beginning (think Judas) up to the present time, that's not the Lord's point in the Parable of the Weeds. .

The Hidden Treasure: Matthew 13:44

Questions

1. What does the treasure represent?
2. What does the field represent?
3. What is the significance of the fact that the treasure is hidden in the ground?
4. What does the man represent?
5. What is the significance of the man's action?

Answers

1. What does the treasure represent?

It represents the kingdom of heaven.

2. What does the field represent?

The field represents the world.

3. What is the significance of the fact that the treasure is hidden in the ground?

Most people don't know the treasure is there. They don't recognize the kingdom of heaven in their midst.

4. What does the man represent?

The man represents someone who discovers the kingdom and recognizes its value.

5. What is the significance of the man's action?

The man gives up everything he has to obtain the treasure, for he recognizes it is worth more than all he has.

Exposition

The treasure represents the kingdom of heaven—Jesus tells us so with the words, “the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field.” The field here represents the world, as in the Parable of the Sower, the Parable of the Weeds, and the Parable of Mustard Seed. The fact that it is *hidden* in a field suggests that most people in the world are unaware of its existence. Just as the seed, or word of the kingdom in the Parable of the Sower, falls on much ground where it cannot take root (that is, the gospel encounters many hearts that cannot receive it), so the treasure is not found by everyone. Indeed, it was hidden from the crowds that heard Jesus tell this very parable.

The hiddenness of the kingdom, however, is not the main point of the parable. The main point is that the cost of discipleship is high, but more than worth it. The man who found the treasure had to sell all he had in order to buy the field and the treasure contained in it. That makes the man representative of those who are determined to do whatever it takes to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus taught this truth in plain words on another occasion:

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple... So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. *Luke 14:26-27, 33*

Giving up all for Christ and his kingdom amounts to exercising saving faith. We give up faith in ourselves and in our own resources; we no longer rely on our bank account, our job or our business, our good health, and the strength we derive from our family and friends. More important, we give up faith in our own goodness and fitness for heaven. All these things, including our own righteousness, are idols if we look to them for any kind of salvation. Instead we put our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, who lived and died for us. “Salvation belongs to the LORD” (Jonah. 2:9).

But the kingdom of heaven is worth the cost; it is truly a treasure. We gain so much more than we lose!

And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life." *Matthew 19:29*

Again, the main point of the parable is that the kingdom of heaven is of inestimable value, worth far more than what we give up to obtain it, even though we must give up all.

Some commentators suggest that another point of the parable is that the kingdom of heaven is hidden such that not everyone finds his way into it. That is true, but it is not the main point of the parable. The Parable of the Pearl of Great Value, which follows, has the same main point as this parable, and it does not make the pearl hidden. The hiddenness of the kingdom of heaven was implicit in the Lord's words to the disciples spoken in reply to their question, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" (Matthew 13:10-17). The hiddenness of the kingdom may be a secondary truth the Lord wants us to recognize, but it is not the main point.

The Pearl of Great Value: Matthew 13:45-46

Questions

1. What does the pearl of great value represent?
2. What does the merchant represent?
3. What do we learn from the fact that the merchant sold all he had to obtain the pearl?

Answers

1. *What does the pearl of great value represent?*

It represents the kingdom of heaven.

2. *What does the merchant represent?*

He represents a person searching for what is of most value in life.

3. *What do we learn from the fact that the merchant sold all he had to obtain the pearl?*

The man sells everything he has to obtain the pearl, for he recognizes it is worth more than all his wealth and possessions. He represents the person who gives up everything he has in the world to obtain a place in the kingdom of heaven.

4. *How is the merchant different from the man in the Parable of the Hidden Treasure?*

The merchant was actively seeking something of great value, whereas the man who found the treasure in the field stumbled on it without looking for it.

Exposition

This parable teaches the same lesson as the Parable of the Hidden Treasure. The main point is that one must give up all one has to gain the infinitely more valuable kingdom of heaven. The inestimable value of the kingdom of heaven is assumed; the main point is that when one recognizes its value, he or she must forsake all else to obtain a place in the kingdom. This determination to do whatever it takes to be part of the kingdom of heaven is what Jesus spoke of in Matthew 11:12:

“From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of Heaven has been taken by storm and eager men are forcing their way into it. *J. B. Phillips New Testament*

Included in “all we have” is our own righteousness, which is of the flesh:

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ. *Philippians 3:4b-8*

The Apostle Paul, who wrote those words to the Philippians, had learned the lesson of the Parable of the Hidden Treasure and of the Parable of the Pearl of Great Value. Have you?

This parable is one of the few that have more than one main point. One difference between this parable and the Parable of the Hidden Treasure is that the merchant was looking for the thing of greatest value in the world, whereas the man who found the treasure stumbled on it unawares—he was not sweeping his metal detector over the ground in hopes of finding something. So it is with the kingdom of heaven. Some people are surprised by the gospel. They have no interest in spiritual things until the Lord confronts them in some way, and the Holy Spirit convicts them that the gospel is true and that they need it more than anything. Other people know there is spiritual truth out there somewhere and look for it, finally to find the gospel after searching.

However one comes face to face with Christ, whether unawares or after a time of searching, those who enter the kingdom recognize that they must give up the pursuit of other goals and give up all other means of pleasing God, laying hold of the kingdom by faith in Jesus Christ alone. Jesus taught this plainly, apart from parables:

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. *Matthew 6:33*

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. *Luke 14:26-27*

Jesus is not teaching that self-sacrifice *earns* a place in the kingdom; it is simply that no man can serve two masters (Matthew 6:24). God is a jealous God (Exodus 25:5) who insists that we have no other god before him (Exodus. 20:2).

The Net: Matt. 13:47-50

Questions

1. What does the net represent?
2. What does the sea represent?
3. We are told that the fishermen represent the angels, the good and bad fish represent the righteous and the wicked, and the separating of fish into good and bad represents the judgment at the end of the age. What other parable presents the same event using different things to represent these persons and events?

Answers

1. What does the net represent?

The net represents the kingdom of heaven.

2. What does the sea represent?

The sea represents the world.

3. We are told that the fishermen represent the angels, the good and bad fish represent the righteous and the wicked, and the separating of fish into good and bad represents the judgment at the end of the age. What other parable presents the same event using different things to represent these persons and events?

The Parable of the Weeds.

Exposition

The Parable of the Net teaches the same truth as the Parable of the Weeds, necessary changes being made. In the one parable the world is represented by a field, in the other it is represented by the sea. In both parables there are wicked and righteous people. In both parables the wicked are separated from the righteous by angels and are cast into a fiery furnace.

This truth was preached by John the Baptist, the forerunner of King Jesus. John warned

I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. *Matthew 3:11-12*

Note the following differences between the parables. The Parable of the Net has no one corresponding to the enemy who sowed weeds in the field (no one placed bad fish in the sea). Also, nothing in the Parable of the Weeds corresponds to the net; that is, nothing corresponds directly to the kingdom of heaven.⁷ The Lord tells us that kingdom of heaven is like the net; that is, the net represents the kingdom of heaven. What can we learn from that?

We learn, first of all, that the kingdom of heaven presently contains both the wicked and the righteous, the unsaved and the saved. In the Parable of the Weeds it was the field, representing the world which contains both the wicked and the righteous. Is the world in the Parable of the Weeds equivalent to the net in the Parable of the Net? Perhaps, but it is more likely that the sea is equivalent to the world in the Parable of the Net. The net represents not the world, but the church.

This is not nitpicking, for it helps us understand better the relationship between the kingdom of heaven and the church. The kingdom of heaven on earth today is equivalent to what theologians call the *visible church*. The visible church consists of all on earth who have made

⁷ Matthew 13:41 and 13:43 refer to the kingdom of Christ and of his Father, but no element in the parable represents it.

public confession of their faith in Jesus Christ and have been baptized, and their children.⁸ It has always contained false Christians as well as those who are truly born again—good and bad fish.

Protestant theologians make a distinction between the visible church and the *invisible church*.⁹ The invisible church consists of those who are truly children of God, those who have saving faith in Christ. Some members of the invisible church have passed on to glory and are in heaven (called the Church Triumphant) and some remain in the world (called the Church Militant).

Why is it important to know this? It is important because some in the visible Church are bad fish. Are we good fish or bad fish? Those who profess to be Christians are exhorted to make sure of their salvation:

Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test! 2 *Corinthians 13:5*

There is a day of judgment coming, when all people will be separated into two groups: the righteous (in Christ) and the wicked. The most important thing a person can and must do is to put on the righteousness of Christ by faith, to make sure that he or she is right before God, before Christ purges all causes of offense out of his kingdom, casting the wicked into everlasting fire.

⁸ Those who hold to believers' baptism don't recognize that all children of believers belong to the church. They don't accept the distinction between the visible church and the invisible church,

⁹ Some commentators find the seed of this distinction in the writings of St. Augustine. The modern Roman Catholic Church rejects the distinction.

LATER PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

Jesus told these parables after revealing to his disciples that he was going up to Jerusalem to be crucified. He spoke the last seven parables in this section after entering the Holy City to the hosannas of the people just a week before his crucifixion.

The Unforgiving Servant: Matthew 18:21-35

Questions

1. Who does the king represent?
2. Who do the servants represent?
3. A talent was approximately 75 pounds of silver or gold. At current prices, 10,000 talents of silver would be worth \$148.8 million and 10,000 talents of gold would be worth \$11 billion. How could a servant possibly owe his master ten thousand talents? What does that debt represent?
4. The servant promised to pay it all back. How could he make such a promise? What does that kind of promise represent as far as our sins are concerned?
5. The master forgave the entire debt. What is the spiritual meaning of that? What does it tell us about the kingdom of God?
6. The fellow servant owed the first servant 100 denarii. That amounted to about 100 days' wages. Was it reasonable for him to say that he would pay it back if the first servant was patient?
7. The master, upon learning of the first servant's unwillingness to forgive, became angry and "put him in prison until he should pay the debt." What does the prison represent?
8. How long would it take the servant to repay the 10,000 talents?
9. What is the point or lesson of the parable? (v. 35)

Answers

1. Who does the king represent?

God.

2. Who do the servants represent?

Professing Christians. Unbelievers would not be called servants.

3. A talent was approximately 75 pounds of silver or gold. At current prices, 10,000 talents of silver would be worth \$148.5 million and 10,000 talents of gold would be worth \$11 billion. How could a servant possibly owe his master ten thousand talents? What does that debt represent?

Every hearer would recognize that the sum had a symbolic meaning and could never represent the debt a servant could accumulate. Jesus used a figure so large that his listeners would know there was no way the servant could pay it back.

The debt represents the righteous due to God, or, to look at it from the other side, our sins. The huge sum may also indicate that God demands perfect, infinite righteousness from us. Looking at it from the other side, it tells us that our sins are far more grievous than we can imagine.

4. The servant promised to pay it all back. How could he make such a promise? What does that kind of promise represent as far as our sins are concerned?

Many people have no sense of sin at all, but many of those who do have a sense of sin promise God that they will be good “from now on” and do enough good deeds that their good deeds will outweigh their bad deeds in the final reckoning.

5. The master forgave the entire debt. What is the spiritual meaning of that?

God is willing to forgive even the greatest sins.

6. The fellow servant owed the first servant 100 denarii. That amounted to about 100 days' wages. Was it reasonable for him to say that he would pay it back if the first servant was patient?

Yes, he could repay his debt, given time.

7. The master, upon learning of the first servant's unwillingness to forgive, became angry and “put him in prison until he should pay the debt.” What does the prison represent?

Hell.

8. How long would it take the servant to repay the 10,000 talents?

Eternity.

9. What is the point or lesson of the parable? What does it tell us about the kingdom of God? (v. 35)

Considering how much God has forgiven us, we need to forgive those who have sinned against us. If we don't, when Christ comes at the close of the age to usher in his kingdom, we will find

that our sins were not forgiven after all. We will be among those to whom the Lord will say, “I never knew you.” Hell then awaits.

Exposition

This parable immediately follows Matthew 18:21-22, where Peter asks the Lord how often he should forgive his brother when he sins against him. The Lord replies in essence that he should always forgive, no matter how many times he is sinned against. The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant reinforces that command, and tells the consequences of not forgiving those who sin against us.

The king represents God; the servants represent people, in particular, those who profess Christ. The debts represent the righteousness we owe God, or, the sins we commit. The first servant represents all of us insofar as our debt, like his, is so large that it can never be repaid. We can never be good enough to repay God for our sins against him.

The servant asks the master to be patient and says he will repay in time. The disciples, on hearing the parable, knew that was impossible. By making the debt so impossibly large, the Lord was teaching that nothing one does can pay for one’s sins. We need forgiveness. The fact that the master forgave such a large debt showed that God is willing to forgive the greatest sins.

But our forgiveness is conditional, a fact we Protestants often overlook as we emphasize that we are saved by grace through faith, not by good works. Forgiveness is not conditioned on not sinning again—re-read vs. 21 and 22. It is conditioned on our forgiving those who sin against us. Jesus taught this not only in this parable but also in the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:12:

...and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

Like repentance, forgiveness must accompany faith. Neither repentance, faith, nor forgiving others should be considered good works, though they are necessary if we are to be saved and enter the kingdom of heaven.

The first servant represents us in that he needs forgiveness; he can never pay for his sins. Let us endeavor to be sure he does not represent us in his unforgiving spirit, for if we harden our hearts and refuse to forgive those who wrong us we will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

All of us are tempted to remember slights and wrongs against us. The flesh may still nurture those feelings, but we can mortify them by our actions. *Forgiveness is a conscious act.* We can forgive by the power of the Spirit.

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. *Matthew 6:43-44*

The Laborers in the Vineyard: Matthew 20:1-16

Questions

1. Who does the master of the house represent?
2. What does the vineyard represent?
3. Who do the laborers represent?
4. Some of the laborers worked all day, others only part of the day. What does that tell us about the children of the kingdom?
5. What does the denarius that the master gave to each laborer represent?
6. Why did the laborers who had worked all day object to the master's principle of remuneration?
7. Why did the master pay all the laborers the same?
8. What is the point of the parable?

Answers

1. Who does the master of the house represent?

God.

2. What does the vineyard represent?

The world.

3. Who do the laborers represent?

Children of the kingdom, that is, Christians.

4. Some of the laborers worked all day, others only part of the day. What does that tell us about the children of the kingdom?

Some come to Christ early in life and serve him many years, some come to Christ later in life and have few years of service.

5. What does the denarius that the master gave to each laborer represent?

Our heavenly reward, eternal life.

6. Why did the laborers who had worked all day object to the master's principle of remuneration?

They thought it was only fair that, since they had worked more, they should receive a greater reward.

7. Why did the master pay all the laborers the same?

It was his will. All had accepted the master's terms; he gave them every bit as much as they had agreed on.

8. What is the point of the parable?

God justifies and gives eternal life to all who come to him on his terms, that is, those who repent and receive Jesus Christ by faith.

Exposition

The master of the house is God, or Christ. The vineyard is the world. The laborers are the children of the kingdom. We can be sure of these things because God, the world, and the children of the kingdom of heaven show up in so many of these kingdom parables. In this parable nothing or no one represents the wicked found in the kingdom of heaven. The wicked are present in the Parable of the Weeds and the Parable of the Net; they have no part in the Parable of the Sower, the Parable of the Hidden Treasure, and the Parable of the Pearl of Great Value. They will show up in other parables we take up later.

The laborers each agree to the master's terms and go to work in the vineyard. No doubt most who heard the parable were as surprised as the laborers when the master of the house gave them all the same pay at the end of the day. The natural, human thing is to assume that those who work more will receive more when payday rolls around. To be sure, as the master reminds them, they all received exactly what they agreed on, but they still questioned

whether that was fair. If we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that we too struggle with the fairness issue in this parable.

The spiritual truth exhibited by equal pay for all is that everyone who comes to Christ for salvation receives the same reward, the reward promised in the gospel. That reward is eternal life in the kingdom of God.

This is a lesson we need to learn, for most of us naturally feel that those who serve God faithfully all life-long ought to receive a greater reward than those who are converted on their deathbed after a wicked or unconcerned life.¹⁰ But God is a God of grace. *He gives us what we need, not what our works deserve.* He gives what he promised without regard for our works.

It would be easy to read into this parable something that isn't there. That would be the idea that we earn our salvation by our good works. All the laborers worked in the vineyard for some period of time; the master did not hand out money to those who never set foot there. One could come away with the mistaken idea that, as for those who do not have enough good works, well, God in his grace accepts them anyway and makes up the difference, so to speak.

That is *not* the point of the parable; that is not the way of salvation. God doesn't "make up the difference" between what we can do and what he requires of us. He demands perfect righteousness, and we sinners have no righteousness at all that we can contribute:

We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. *Isaiah 64:6*

God provides *all* our righteousness, the infinite righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Simply going into the vineyard to work assures the laborer of a denarius. We can identify going into the vineyard as believing in Christ—that is made clear in the next parable, the Parable of the Two Sons. Believing in Christ brings the same promised reward to all, eternal life.

Jesus began and ended the parable with the words, "So the last will be first and the first last." That is actually the main point of the Parable of Laborers in the Vineyard.

Those words would take on more significance in years to come as Gentiles responded to the gospel and entered the kingdom of heaven, Christ's church. Jews in general, including Jewish Christians, thought their faithfulness over the centuries entitled them to a more exalted place in the kingdom than the place occupied by Gentile converts, whose ancestors had worshiped idols for time out of mind while the Jews worshiped Yahweh, the one true God.

Within a few days the Lord would tell the Parable of the Two Sons, the Parable of the Tenants, and the Parable of the Wedding Feast. These parables deal with the stubborn unbelief of the Jews and the faith of the Gentiles. Gentile Christians, who began to come to faith after the Resurrection, were last in time, but they became first. The Jews, who had worshiped the one true God for so long, by their unbelief became last. "So the last will be first and the first last."

Unlike most parables, this parable has two main points, or perhaps only one with a special application:

¹⁰ The Apostle Paul does write of different rewards for different service in 1 Corinthians 3:1-15, but in this parable the Lord is speaking of the great reward, eternal life.

1. God is gracious. To those who respond to his offer, God gives a place in his eternal kingdom that does not depend on how much they have done for him.

2. The last will be first and the first last. The Gentiles, so long the last, were to become first; the Jews, so long the first, were to become last. The Book of Acts recounts the historical beginning of this great change. Perhaps we should consider this point a special application of the first point: God has been especially gracious to the Gentiles, bringing them into the kingdom after so many millennia of bowing down to false gods instead of their true Creator.

The Two Sons: Matthew 21:28-32

Questions

1. Who does the father represent?
2. Who does the first son represent?
3. Who does the second son represent?
4. What does the vineyard represent?
5. What does working in the vineyard represent?

Answers

1. Who does the father represent?

God.

2. Who does the first son represent?

Tax collectors and prostitutes, representative of notorious sinners.

3. Who does the second son represent?

The chief priests and elders of the people (vs. 23 ff.)

4. What does the vineyard represent?

The kingdom of God (v. 31).

5. What does working in the vineyard represent?

Doing the will of the Father; i.e., repenting and believing the gospel (vs. v. 32).

Exposition

The father represents God. Jesus interprets the parable and tells us who the sons represent. The first son, who initially refused to work but then changed his mind, represents tax collectors and prostitutes who had lived wicked, godless lives but afterwards repented and believed in Jesus.¹¹ The second son, who promised to work in the vineyard but did not, represents the chief priests and elders of the people (see vs. 23-27). The vineyard represents the kingdom of God.¹²

Jesus identifies going into the vineyard and working there as believing (v. 32). The kingdom work God requires is faith in Jesus Christ:

Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” *John 6:27-29*

The meaning of the Parable of the Two Sons is plain. The real challenge is not in understanding it, but in applying it to ourselves. Are you religious but actually an unbeliever? Ask yourself, do I have a dead faith? The Letter of James has a lot to say about that:

¹¹ The Greek verb translated *changed his mind* is similar in form and meaning to the Greek word for *repent*. Note that the first son is identified with tax collectors and prostitutes. Jesus points out that they repented and believed at the preaching of John the Baptist, who pointed people to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29-34).

¹² In the Parable of the Two Sons and the following Parable of the Tenants, Jesus uses the term *kingdom of God* instead of the term *kingdom of heaven*, the term Matthew usually employs. This fact shows us that the two terms mean one and the same thing, despite the distinction made by dispensationalists. The identity of the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God is further solidified by the fact that when Jesus sent the twelve apostles out to preach, Matthew says he told them to preach the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 10:7), while in the Luke's parallel account of the same incident he tells them to preach the kingdom of God (Luke 9:2).

...faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works. Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.” You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God. For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead. *James 2:17-26*

A living faith shows itself by action. The works James writes of are not “good works” in the sense that word is normally understood, but rather works that show our faith is real. Abraham’s work of offering up his son to be sacrificed in obedience to God’s command was not a good work of charity or mercy. It was an action that showed that he believed God and so obeyed him. If you believe that Jesus is the Savior of the world but have not *personally* called on him to save *you*, your faith is worthless. The chief priests and elders of the people believed the Messiah was to come, but they never acknowledged Jesus as their Messiah or called on him to save them.

Have you lived a sinful life, not caring about God or your soul? That was the case with the prostitutes and the tax collectors (the latter lived off money they extorted from the people). They heard John preach righteousness, saw their need of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world—*their* sin—and repented and believed. Be like them! Then you will find yourself within the kingdom of God rather than someone looking in from the outside.

The Tenants: Matthew 21:33-46

Questions

1. Who does the master of the house represent?
2. What does the vineyard represent?
3. Who do the tenants represent?
4. Who do the servants sent to collect the fruit represent?
5. Who does the master's son represent?
6. What does the "miserable death" of v. 41 represent?
7. Who do the "other tenants" of v. 41 represent?

Answers

1. Who does the master of the house represent?

God the Father.

2. What does the vineyard represent?

The kingdom of God (v. 43).

3. Who do the tenants represent?

The chief priests and the Pharisees (v. 45).

4. Who do the servants sent to collect the fruit represent?

The prophets.

5. Who does the master's son represent?

Jesus Christ.

6. What does the “miserable death” of v. 41 represent?

Probably not hell, but rather the destruction of the temple and the end of the priestly system wrought by the Romans in 70 AD. There is no way Jesus' disciples would know the details of this until it happened. See the exposition below.

7. Who do the “other tenants” of v. 41 represent?

Those who will give the master the fruits of the vineyard in their season (v. 41); they represent the apostles and ministers of Christ's church.

Exposition

The master of the house, later called the owner of the vineyard, represents God. The vineyard represents the kingdom of heaven. The tenants represent the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day. The servants represent the prophets God sent to Israel, whose positive calling was to gather the fruit of the kingdom, faithful Israelites, by turning the people back to God.¹³ The master's son represents Jesus Christ.

The tenants, that is, the Jewish high priestly family and the scribes and elders, saw Jesus as a threat to the continued enjoyment of their privileges, honor and rule, and had him executed. Jesus says that the master—God—will put the wicked tenants to a “miserable death.”

The wicked tenants will receive their punishment “when the owner of the vineyard comes” (v. 41). This coming is *not* the return of Jesus Christ at his Second Coming. The owner of the vineyard is the father of the son who was slain, not the son himself. The Second Coming of our Lord Jesus remains a future event, but God has come. God, the owner of the vineyard, came when he executed judgment on the rulers and residents of Jerusalem. History tells us that they suffered that miserable death when a Roman army took Jerusalem in 70 AD and razed the city completely to the ground, temple included.

¹³ The prophets also had a negative calling, proclaiming God's judgment on a sinful and apostate people.

The historian Josephus, a Jew turned Roman collaborator, describes the destruction of the city and the temple. In his description he points out that the priests did not escape slaughter:

While the Temple was ablaze, the attackers plundered it, and countless people who were caught by them were slaughtered. There was no pity for age and no regard was accorded rank; children and old men, laymen and priests, alike were butchered; every class was pursued and crushed in the grip of war, whether they cried out for mercy or offered resistance.

The new tenants are the apostles and officers of Christ's church. Now it is they who tend the vineyard, that is, it is they who rule, instruct, and guide the church. Their duty is to bring forth fruit for God, that is, to bring people into the church, or kingdom of heaven.

The main point of the parable is this: the Jewish leaders and the people of Jerusalem were to be punished for their unbelief and others would be selected to replace them in the kingdom of heaven. This parable was prophetic, and the prophecy has come to pass. The Christian church, the present manifestation of the kingdom of heaven, is primarily Gentile, as are its officers.

Sadly, the truth taught by the parable has been perverted into antisemitism in the Christian church. Too many rail at the Jews for rejecting Christ and actually rejoice in the suffering they have undergone as a result. We ought rather to mourn over their unbelief and pray and work for their conversion. The Apostle Paul put the case better than anyone in his Letter to the Romans.

First, we see his attitude towards the Jews, his own people:

I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen. *Romans 9:2-5*

Next, we see how we Gentiles should regard our salvation after millennia of idolatry and unbelief:

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. Then you will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. *Romans 11:17-21*

Finally, let us rejoice in the fact that the unbelief of Israel is not permanent. God's ancient people will turn to him again:

Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, "The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob"; "and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins." As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience¹ so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you

they also may now^{b1} receive mercy. For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. *Romans 11:25-32*

The Parable of the Tenants is the second kingdom parable condemning the rulers of the Jewish people and the people of Jerusalem for their unbelief, the first being the Parable of the Two Sons. In the next kingdom parable we will study, the Parable of the Wedding Feast, the main point is repeated

The Wedding Feast: Matthew 22:1-14

Questions

1. Who does the king represent?
2. Who does the son represent?
3. What does the wedding feast represent?
4. Who do the original wedding invitees represent?
5. Who do the servants represent?
6. Who do the new wedding guests represent?
7. What does the fate of the wicked invitees represent?
8. What do we learn from the fact that the wedding guests included both the good and the bad?
9. What does the wedding garment represent?

Answers

1. Who does the king represent?

God the Father.

2. Who does the son represent?

Jesus Christ.

3. What does the wedding feast represent?

The Second Coming, when Christ will come for his bride, the church (Rev. 19:6-9).

4. Who do the original wedding invitees represent?

The Jews.

5. Who do the servants represent?

The prophets.

6. Who do the new wedding guests represent?

Gentiles who profess Christ and are incorporated into the church, i.e., the kingdom of heaven.

7. What does the fate of the wicked invitees represent?

Hell.

8. What do we learn from the fact that the wedding guests included both the good and the bad?

The church (that is, the visible church) contains both sons of the kingdom and sons of the evil one. See the Parable of the Weeds and the Parable of the Net.

9. What does the wedding garment represent?

It may represent the righteousness of Christ (Col. 3:9-12), or it may represent the righteous deeds of the saints (Rev. 19:7-8). See the exposition.

Exposition of the Parable

The king represents God the Father; his son represents Jesus Christ.¹⁴ Based on what follows, the wedding feast must represent the kingdom of heaven. The original wedding guests represent the Jews, who for centuries refused to honor their God by their sin and unbelief, especially the Jews of Jesus' generation, who rejected him as Lord and Savior. The servants represent the prophets, who suffered greatly at the hands of their own people as they sought to bring the Jewish nation back to God.

The new wedding guests represent the Gentiles who were brought into the (visible) church after the Jews rejected Christ. They include those with true faith, represented by a wedding garment, as well as those without a living faith, represented by the man without a wedding garment. The destruction of the wicked people who disdained to come to the feast and

¹⁴ Jesus referred to himself as the Bridegroom in Matthew 9:15.

murdered the servants represents the destruction of Jerusalem and of the temple and its system by the Romans in 70 AD. These identifications are derived from the Parable of the Tenants, which up to this point teaches the same lesson. The correspondence between the two parables is plain.

The Parable of the Wedding Feast is one of the few parables that have more than one main point. The Parable of the Wedding Feast has a second point to make which is not part of the otherwise similar Parable of the Great Banquet (next in our series). The Parable of the Wedding Feast states that there were both good and bad people present at the feast, that is, in the kingdom of heaven. That in itself is not a new revelation; the Parable of the Weeds and the Parable of the Net tell us that. What is new here is that the difference between the good and the bad is whether or not the guest has a wedding garment. The wedding garment represents the righteousness of Christ; that is the only difference between the saved and the lost.

Whether a guest had or had not a wedding garment was of monumental import. According to the commentators, the host—in this case, the king—provided the wedding garment. A guest who did not wear the furnished garment was in effect insulting his host. Our wedding garment is the righteousness of Christ, offered to all and received by faith alone.

Alternatively, the wedding garment represents the righteous deeds of those who belong to Christ:

The marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. *Revelation 19:7-8*

No one who claims to belong to Christ but does not show it by his or her works is worthy to be a guest. We are not saved by our works, but they show that we are genuine (James. 2:17-18, 21-24).

The guest in the parable who lacked a wedding garment was not simply escorted to the door; he was bound hand and foot and cast into outer darkness. That is clearly a picture of eternal punishment in hell. So it is with those in the church who have not the righteousness of Christ. At the judgment they too will be cast into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Jesus taught this plainly and not in a parable on the occasion when he healed the servant of a Roman (Gentile) army officer. Matthew recounts the event:

When Jesus heard this [the officer's confession of faith], he marveled and said to those who followed him, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” *Matthew 8:10-12*

The second point of the parable, then, is that true, living faith is required of Gentiles as well as Jews; only by faith can one accept the righteousness of Christ. Gentiles within the visible kingdom of heaven who lack saving faith will be cast out just as unbelieving Jews will be.

The takeaway for us is two-fold, related to the two main points of the parable. First, we Gentiles need to thank God for opening the kingdom to us. Second, we need to examine our lives to see if we have true faith in Christ as *our* Savior and Lord.

The Great Banquet: Luke 14:15-24

Questions

1. How is the host of this banquet different from the host of the wedding feast in the previous parable? Does he represent God, as did the host in that parable?
2. What does the great banquet represent?
3. Who do the original wedding invitees represent?
4. What can we conclude from the excuses the invited guests give for not attending the banquet?
5. Who do the servants represent?
6. Who do the new wedding guests represent?
7. What is the fate of the original guests?

Answers

1. How is the host of this banquet different from the host of the wedding feast in the previous parable? Does he represent God, as did the host in that parable?

The host in this parable is not a king, but he does represents God.

2. What does the great banquet represent?

The kingdom of God.

3. Who do the original wedding invitees represent?

The Jews. In this parable they apparently represent all the Jews, not just the Jewish leaders.

4. Who do the servants represent?

They may represent the prophets, as in the Parable of the Wedding Feast, but it's more likely they represent the apostles and evangelists, for the host later sends them out to bring in anyone who will come—the Gentiles.

45 What can we conclude from the excuses the invited guests give for not attending the banquet?

The invited guests had no respect for the host and no interest in attending the banquet. Their excuses are lame. The guests could hardly expect the host to take them at face value; their refusal was an insult, and they knew the host would know it.

6. Who do the new wedding guests represent?

They represent Gentiles (primarily) who turn to Christ

7. What is the fate of the original guests?

They are excluded from the kingdom of God. “None of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.”

Exposition

This parable is similar in some ways to the Parable of the Wedding Feast, but there are enough significant differences to indicate that it is not a re-telling of the Parable of the Wedding Feast:

1. Jesus told this parable at a dinner party some months prior to his coming up to Jerusalem to be crucified; he told the Parable of the Wedding Feast after his Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem.

2. The feast in this parable is a great banquet, but it is not a wedding feast. No groom is mentioned.

3. In this parable the invited guests give excuses as to why they won't come; in the Parable of the Wedding Feast the invited guests seize the king's messengers, treat them shamefully, and kill them.

4. Nothing happens to the invited guests who would not come in this parable except that they will not get to taste of the banquet. In the Parable of the Wedding Feast they are bound hand and foot and cast into outer darkness.

5. This parable has nothing comparable with Matthew 22:11-14, where the king encounters a guest without a wedding garment.

The Parable of the Great Banquet is a kingdom parable, though it lacks the introductory phrase, “The kingdom of heaven is like....” Jesus told it at a dinner party in response to the exclamation of another guest, “Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” (Luke 14:15). By following the man’s remark up with this parable, Jesus indicates that not everyone shares his view.

The Parable of the Great Banquet makes two points, unlike most parables. The first point is that, though God offers many the blessing of a place in his kingdom, not all appreciate or seek that blessing.

We see this scenario played out in our own day. Absent a God-sent awakening, most people have little or no interest in God’s eternal kingdom. Some think they will get to heaven automatically—their God is a big old softy, an indulgent Father who wouldn’t shut anyone out of heaven. Others are secular to the core, focused on the things of this world. When they encounter the gospel message, “the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful” (Matthew 13:22).

The second point is that “The Lord is...not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). His desire for people to be saved is such that he tells his servants to *compel* them to come in, that his heavenly kingdom may be full (14:23).

The Apostle Paul felt this compulsion to compel them to come in:

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says, “In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.” Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry. *2 Corinthians 5:20-6:3*

We his servants are to urge men and women to turn to Christ and be saved; it is not enough to say, “Well, the church doors are open if anyone wants to come.”

Compelling them to come in does not mean using worldly appeals and methods:

But we have renounced disgraceful underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God. *2 Corinthians 4:2*

Some so-called seeker-friendly churches and Christian preachers do that. But it is by “open statement of the truth” that we are to urge upon our family, friends, neighbors, and those who are afar off the necessity and blessing of becoming part of God’s kingdom by turning to Christ as Lord and Savior.

The Fig Tree: Matthew 24:32-34

The fact that these words of Jesus constitute a parable is obscured by several popular modern translations. The ESV, NIV, and RSV all refer to this pericope¹⁵ as a *lesson*. But the Greek word found in Matthew is the word *parabolen*, translated *parable* elsewhere in those translations and here by the KJV, the NKJV, and the NASB.

The Lord uses a fact with which his hearers would be familiar to illustrate a truth they need to take to heart. That is what parables do. In this case the Lord is speaking to his disciples; his intent is to make the truth clear rather than to conceal (Matthew 13:11-15; see the Introduction).

The parable is short:

From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.¹⁶ *Matthew 24:32-34*

Jesus had told his disciples that the temple would be razed to the ground (24:2). They asked him, “Tell us when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (24:3). He responded to their questions in vs. 4-28. Just as the leafing out of the fig tree means summer is near, so, as “all these things” (v. 33) unfold, the return of the Lord is at hand.

To summarize “all these things”:

1. False Christs will arise.
2. There will be wars and rumors of wars.
3. Nation will rise against nation.
4. Famines and earthquakes.¹⁷

Take note that these events DO NOT signify that the end is near; they are the birth pangs of the end times, not their culmination. Too many Christians think that earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and other natural disasters are portents of the end; Jesus emphasizes that they are only the *beginning of the church age*.

5. Christians will undergo suffering and death; indeed, they will be hated by all nations.¹⁸

¹⁵ A pericope (pronounced peh-rih'-co-pee) is a small, self-contained section of one of the gospels.

¹⁶ We won't get into the interpretation of “this generation will not pass away” in our study.

¹⁷ Luke's parallel account adds pestilences to the list of disasters (Luke 21:11).

6. Many will fall away from Christ during times of persecution (consider the seed that fell on the rocky ground in the Parable of the Sower), and the apostates will betray and hate those who remain faithful.
7. False prophets will arise and lead many astray.
8. The love of many Christians will grow cold because of persecution.
9. When God's people see the "abomination of desolation" in the holy place, they are to flee Jerusalem.
10. In spite of all the tribulation the church is to endure, the gospel will be preached throughout the whole world (see the Parable of the Leaven).

The abomination of desolation in the holy place was predicted by Daniel in Daniel 9:24-27. We will make no attempt to interpret that prophecy, except to say that it refers to the desecration of the temple in Jerusalem (thus answering the disciples' question regarding Christ's remark about no stone of the temple being left upon another).

Daniel's prophecy about the abomination of desolation had two fulfillments and will likely have a third. The first fulfillment happened several hundred years before Christ under the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes.

The second fulfillment happened when the Romans sacked Jerusalem in 70 AD. Luke 21:10-24 is another version of the Lord's words in Matthew 24:3-28. Luke 21:20-24 explains the desolation following the Roman victory, and goes on to add that "Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled." We are living in those times.

The text, along with other Scripture, suggests that there will be a future appearance of the abomination of desolation before the Lord returns. That will be part of the rise of the last and greatest antichrist.¹⁸ There are too many theories about this to list and evaluate here.

11. After the events of 1-10, above, the end is still not yet until the gospel is preached throughout the whole earth (9, above).

The leafing out of the fig tree in this parable corresponds to "all these things" (Matthew 24:33). When we see them take place we are to look for his coming, which is described in Matthew 24:29-31.

The implication of this truth, that his disciples should be ready for his return after "all these things" is the point of the next pericope, vs. 36-51, and of the Parable of the Ten Virgins, next in our series.

¹⁸ The Apostle John saw a vision of the opening of seven seals; the first five correspond to points 2, 3, 4, and 5 above (Revelation 6:3-11).

¹⁹ There have already been many antichrists; we are already in the last hour (1 John 2:18).

The Ten Virgins: Matthew 25:1-13

Jesus spoke this parable after his admonition to watch and be ready for his coming (Matthew 24:36-51). Read those verses first, for they cast light on the meaning of the parable. Indeed, all of chapter 24 provides the context in which the parable was given. The whole of chapter 24 deals with the end of the age, which (perhaps to our surprise) begins with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. It seems the end of the age covers a long time, the last 2000 years! That is a topic for another day.

Because the end of the age has gone on so long, we are prone to forget that some day when we don't expect it Jesus will return to earth with rewards and punishment for mankind. He warns us in Matthew 24:42-44 to watch and be ready.

Questions

1. Who does the bridegroom represent?
2. Who do the ten virgins represent?
3. What do their lamps represent?
4. What does the delay of the bridegroom represent?
5. What does the delay of the bridegroom result in?
6. What does oil represent?
7. The five wise virgins thought to bring extra oil. What does that picture?
8. The five foolish virgins didn't think to bring oil. What does that picture?
9. What is represented by the shutting of the door?
10. What is the main point of this parable?

Answers

1. Who does the bridegroom represent?

Jesus Christ.

2. Who do the ten virgins represent?

Those who have been invited to the marriage feast; the members of the church.

3. What do their lamps represent?

The hearts of the members of the church

4. What does the delay of the bridegroom represent?

The Lord's return seems long delayed to us. See the exposition.

5. What does the delay of the bridegroom result in?

First, all the virgins fell asleep waiting. When they awoke, half of them found they were running out of oil.

6. What does oil represent?

Faith. See the exposition.

7. The five wise virgins thought to bring extra oil. What does that picture?

Their faith was able to last till Christ returned.

8. The five foolish virgins didn't think to bring oil. What does that picture?

Their faith was only temporary; it did not last. The seed sown on the rocky ground in the Parable of the Sower produced the same kind of temporary faith.

9. What is represented by the shutting of the door?

It will be too late to repent and believe when Christ comes.

10. What is the main point of this parable?

We must make sure that the faith we have is saving faith. See the exposition.

Exposition

Some features of the parable are strange to modern readers. It isn't hard to see that the bridegroom represents Christ, and the bridegroom's coming represents Christ's return at the end of the age. That we understand from other Scripture. But where is the bride? Are the ten virgins the attendants of the bride, bridesmaids, as it were?

To answer these questions we need to know something about wedding customs in Jesus' time. According to the commentaries, after the betrothal formalities and ceremonies the bride-to-be remained in her father's house until the groom came to take her to his own home. The approximate time of his coming was known, but the exact time was unannounced—it was to be a surprise.

A Hebrew Christian congregation, Congregation Netzer Torah Yeshua, has posted a description of wedding customs in first century Judaism

www.messianicfellowship.50webs.com/weddingritual. Part of that description describes the coming of the bridegroom:

The coming of the Bridegroom and the Wedding Begins

Since the time of his arrival was a surprise - the bride and her bridal party were always to be ready - this is the background of Yeshua's parable (Mat. 25:1-13). It was customary for one of the groom's party to go ahead of the bridegroom, leading the way to the bride's house - and shout - "Behold, the bridegroom comes." This would be followed by the sounding of the shofar. At the sounding of the shofar the entire wedding processional would go through the streets of the city to the bride's house. The groomsmen would again set up the huppah [the canopy under which the couple took their vows]:

- Again the couple would say a blessing over the cup of wine.
- The ceremony finalized the promises and vows.
- The pinnacle of this joyful celebration was the marriage supper:
- It was much more than just a sit down dinner for all the guests.
- It included seven full days of food, music, dance and celebration - (Jn. 14:10-12).
- After the festivities the husband was free to bring his bride to their new home to live together as husband and wife in the full covenant of marriage.

Bearing these things in mind, we can begin to interpret this parable.

As noted above, the bridegroom is the Lord Jesus and his coming for his bride is his Second Coming. It seems that the ten virgins represent members of the kingdom of heaven, the visible church. They symbolize the same people as the wedding guests in the Parable of the Wedding Feast.

Why isn't the church represented by the bride herself, since the New Testament refers to the church as the Bride of Christ (Revelation 19:7, 21:2, 21:9, 22:17)? The answer probably lies in the fact that the virgins fall into two groups, one of which has a bad end and one a good end. The bride is but one person; she can't represent both groups. In this parable the virgins have to fill in for the church.

Interpreting the meaning of the lamps and the oil is possibly the hardest part of the parable, and commentators differ here. Some see the oil as the Bible, the Word of God; others say the oil represents the Holy Spirit. One commentator sees the oil as the desire for salvation; others see it as a Christian's good works.

I believe we can correctly interpret the oil by recognizing that the foolish virgins had oil in their lamps at the beginning as well as the wise virgins, but because he was delayed they didn't have enough oil to last until he appeared. Bearing that in mind, I interpret the oil as faith. The wise virgins had saving faith. *Saving faith is persevering faith.* The foolish virgins represent those in the church who begin a life of faith, but their faith peters out and does not last. The faith of those represented by the foolish virgins is like the seed sown in the soil that had no depth of earth in the Parable of the Sower (Mt. 13:20-21).²⁰ It sprang up enthusiastically, but withered away when times got tough.

²⁰ The Greek word Jesus uses to describe these people is *proskairoi*, "for the time." St. Jerome's Latin Vulgate rendering of *proskairoi* is *temporalis*, "temporaries."

The old gospel chorus seems to recognize that the lamps are our hearts and that oil is faith:

Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning, burning, burning,
Give me oil in my lamp I pray
Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning, burning, burning,
Keep me burning till the break of day.

Hymns as well as gospel choruses have taken this parable for a theme. The Lutheran Philipp Nicolai wrote these hymn lyrics more than 400 years ago:

“Wake, awake, for night is flying,”
The watchmen on the heights are crying;
Awake, Jerusalem, arise!”
Midnight hears the welcome voices
And at the thrilling cry rejoices:
“Oh, where are ye, ye virgins wise?
The Bridegroom comes, awake!
Your lamps with gladness take!
Hallelujah!
With bridal care yourselves prepare
To meet the Bridegroom, who is near.”
Zion hears the watchmen singing,
And all her heart with joy is springing,
She wakes, she rises from her gloom;
For her Lord comes down all-glorious,
The strong in grace, in truth victorious,
Her Star is ris'n, her Light is come.
“Now come, Thou Blessed One,
Lord Jesus, God's own Son,
Hail! Hosanna!
The joyful call we answer all
And follow to the nuptial hall.”

Another Lutheran, Laurentius Laurenti, celebrated the joy of the Bridegroom's arrival with these words from a well-known hymn sometimes sung at Christmas:

Rejoice, rejoice, believers, and let your lights appear.
The evening is advancing, and darker night is near.
The Bridegroom is arising, and soon He draweth nigh.
Up, pray, and watch, and wrestle: At midnight comes the cry.
See that your lamps are burning; replenish them with oil.
And wait for your salvation, the end of earthly toil.
The watchers on the mountain proclaim the Bridegroom near.
Go meet Him as He cometh, with alleluias clear.
O wise and holy virgins, now raise your voices higher,
Until in songs of triumph ye meet the angel choir.
The marriage feast is waiting, the gates wide open stand,
Rise up, ye heirs of glory, the Bridegroom is at hand.

The hymn writers celebrate the return of Christ with joyful lyrics. But the foolish virgins, symbolizing those whose faith does not endure to the end, will experience not the exultation expressed in these hymns, but anguish.

Just before he told this parable, Jesus had declared that the love of many would grow cold because of the long period of wickedness to take place before he returns:

And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. *Matthew 24:12-1*

Many in the early days of church expected the Lord to return soon. They knew they were living in the last days—how long would the last days last? The Lord's delay led to scoffing by unbelievers:

Scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.” *2 Peter 3:3-4*

What then is the main point of the parable? Is it that we should not be surprised that Christ has not yet returned, after such a long time? Is it that we need to have saving faith, a faith that perseveres through hard times and even persecution? Is it that members of the church whose faith withers away will be shut out of Christ's kingdom? No; all those things are true, but the Lord himself tells us plainly what the point of the parable is in v. 13: “Watch therefore for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

Watching doesn't mean always thinking about the Second Coming. All the virgins, the wise as well as the foolish, slumbered and slept. *Watching means being ready when the time comes.* Everyone needs to be ready by repenting of his or her sins and casting himself or herself on Christ in faith that he has paid for all of one's sins and won eternal life for all who believe. Are you ready? Get ready now. When Christ returns it will be too late to go and buy oil.

The Talents: Matt. 25:14-30

Questions

1. Who does the man going on a journey represent?
2. Who do the servants represent?
3. What do the talents represent?
4. What prompted the first two servants to invest the money entrusted to them?
5. Why didn't the third servant do what the first two did?
6. What does the return of the man from his journey represent?
7. What did the master praise about the first two servants?
8. How does the master describe the third servant?
9. What is meant by the unfaithful servant being cast into outer darkness?

Answers

1. Who does the man going on a journey represent?

Christ. The journey begins with his ascension into heaven.

2. Who do the servants represent?

Those in the visible church, that is, those in the kingdom of heaven as it presently is found on earth.

3. What do the talents represent?

I believe they represent the Word of God. See the exposition.

4. What prompted the first two servants to invest the money entrusted to them?

They knew their master had entrusted them with the talents to use them, not simply to preserve them. Faithfulness called for them to use the talents for their master's good (vs. 21, 23).

5. Why didn't the third servant do what the first two did?

He was afraid of his master. He lacked faith in his goodness.

6. What does the return of the man from his journey represent?

It represents the return of Christ.

7. What did the master praise about the first two servants?

He praised their faithfulness. They did what a faithful servant or trustee should do. (v. 27).

8. How does the master describe the third servant?

He is wicked and lazy.

9. What is meant by the unfaithful servant being cast into outer darkness?

It is a symbolic picture of the man being cast into hell.

Exposition of the Parable

Having studied over dozen parables of the kingdom up to this point, by now we should be able to recognize the man going on a journey as the Lord Jesus Christ, who ascended into heaven forty days after his resurrection. Also, we should have no trouble identifying the servants as members of the visible church. Considering the miserable end of the unfaithful servant, we cannot identify him as a member of the invisible church, one who has a living faith and is born again. But we have seen in several other parables that at the present time the kingdom of heaven contains both true and false Christians.

The master's return represents the Second Coming of Christ, followed by the Last Judgment.

It is the identity of the talents that gives commentators difficulty; at least, they differ widely in their view of what the talents represent. Most believe they represent the gifts and abilities self-confessed Christians possess.

We should reject that interpretation. The Achilles heel of that view lies in the fact that the word *talent* did not mean the same thing in first-century Greek that it does in twenty-first

century English. The Greek word *talanton* referred to a large sum of money, about 75 pounds worth of silver or gold. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines the English word *talent* as “a special ability that allows someone to do something well.” Those who know only the English word will be prone to identify the talents received by the servants as gifts and abilities. That is not what the Greek word meant. The Greek word referred to something extremely valuable.

Those who have a mistaken view of *talents* are almost certain to conclude that we earn our way into heaven by using the gifts and abilities God has given us to the best of our ability—in other words, that we work our way to heaven. That concept of salvation flies against everything the Bible teaches. Salvation, culminating in heaven, is a gift of God’s grace, received by faith alone; it is not of works.

Other commentators believe the talents represent the Word of God or the gospel. I agree with the second interpretation. Consider how the Lord ended the parable in v. 29:

For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.

The Lord stated the same thing after telling the Parable of the Sower:

For to the one who has more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. *Matthew 13:12*

In the Parable of the Sower, Christ referred to knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, to the Word of God. I believe that he is speaking of the Word of God in the Parable of the Talents also.

I believe Jesus told this parable to show the difference between saving faith and faith that does not save. The garment in the Parable of the Wedding Feast represents faith in the gospel, and the oil in the Parable of the Ten Virgins represents persevering faith; in both cases, faith is what makes the difference between those whom Christ welcomes into his kingdom when he returns and those who are shut out. So it is with the talents. They represent the Word of God, which we must believe to be saved.

Saving faith is faith that proves itself in action. The way the talents were handled by those who had them showed whose faith was genuine and whose was not. The first two servants had faith in their master and put the talents to work for him in expectation that they would be rewarded for their faithfulness.

What does it mean to put the Word of God to work?

It means, first of all, to seek to increase our knowledge of the Word. Some have no knowledge of the gospel to begin with, but those brought up in the church are bound to have at least a little knowledge. Even liberal churches often have a sound liturgy and Bible readings in their services. Evangelical churches should be expected to feature the Bible prominently in their worship and teaching.²¹ The servant who was given five talents represents those blessed with much knowledge to begin with, the servant who received three talents represents a person starting out with less knowledge of the Word. The servant who was entrusted with one talent represents those who know only the rudiments of the gospel—but they have that.

²¹ Sadly, some supposedly evangelical churches in our day preach another gospel (Galatians 1:6) and neglect the Word.

To put the Word of God to work means, secondly, to obey it. The obedience God seeks is the obedience of faith:

Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” *John 6:28-29*

...through [Jesus Christ] we have received grace and apostleship to bring about *the obedience of faith* for the sake of his name. *Romans 1:5, emphasis added.*

The servants did not all receive the same number of talents. The master knew how much each one could handle. The first two servants represent those who, believing the Word, grow in knowledge and in obedience to the Word. The servant who received only one talent represents a person who has been given the essentials of the gospel but has no faith in its promises. Moreover, he is too lazy and wicked to dig into the Word to see if it is true.

The wicked, lazy servant saw the master only as a hard man. He represents a person who fears God but does not trust him or believe the promises in his Word. Lack of saving faith is shown by fear and cowardice as well as by immorality:

But as for the *cowardly*, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death. *Revelation 21:8, emphasis added.*

In the Parable of the Wedding Feast and the Parable of the Ten Virgins we have encountered others whose faith was not saving faith.

The Parable of the Talents brings us round to where we began this series of studies, to the Parable of the Sower. There the Word fell on some ground where it could bear no fruit. And where it did bear fruit, in some places it bore a hundred fold, in some places sixty, in others thirty.

The kingdom of heaven contains both those who believe the Word and those who don't, those who have saving faith and those whose faith is not genuine trust in Christ. What kind of faith do you have?

The Ten Minas: Luke. 19:11-27

This parable is similar to the Parable of the Talents, but it is a different parable, told at a different time. Jesus told the Parable of the Ten Minas when he was drawing near to Jerusalem (Luke 19:11), whereas he told the Parable of the Talents after he had arrived in Jerusalem. In the Parable of the Ten Minas Jesus included some material not found in Matthew.

Questions

1. Why did Jesus tell this parable?
2. Who is represented by the nobleman who went into a far country to receive a kingdom?
3. Who do the servants represent?
4. What is the far country?
5. From whom will Christ receive his kingdom?
6. What do the minas represent?
7. How does the giving of the minas differ from the giving of the talents in the Parable of the Talents?
8. The way the servants handled the minas entrusted to them and the way the newly-crowned king dealt with the servants is so similar to the comparable events in the Parable of the Talents that I have but one question regarding it: How is the fate of the wicked servant different in the two parables?
9. Who are the citizens who hated the nobleman?
10. What happened when the king returned? What does that represent?

Answers

1. Why did Jesus tell this parable?

He told it because his disciples thought the kingdom of God would be inaugurated very soon, probably when the Lord entered Jerusalem.

2. Who is represented by the nobleman who went into a far country to receive a kingdom?

Jesus Christ.

3. Who do the servants represent?

They represent Christians.

4. What is the far country?

Heaven.

5. From whom will Christ receive his kingdom?

God the Father.

6. What do the minas represent?

Again we have the Lord saying at the conclusion of the parable, “I tell you that to everyone who has, more will be given, but from the one who has not even what he has will be taken away” (v. 26). We have seen in the Parable of the Sower and in the Parable of the Talents that these words refer to the message of the kingdom, the gospel. See the exposition

7. How does the giving of the minas differ from the giving of the talents in the Parable of the Talents?

(a) According to the ESV footnote, a mina was worth about three month’s wages—a significant amount of money, but not nearly worth a talent.

(b) Each servant was given the same amount of money, unlike the servants in the Parable of the Talents.

8. The way the servants handled the minas entrusted to them and the way the newly-crowned king dealt with the servants is so similar to the comparable events in the Parable of the Talents that I have but one question regarding it: How is the fate of the wicked servant different in the two parables?

In the Parable of the Talents the wicked servant is cast into hell. In the Parable of the Ten Minas all that is said about the wicked servant is that his mina was taken away.

9. Who are the citizens who hated the nobleman?

Christ may have been speaking primarily of the Jews who rejected him: they were, after all, *citizens* of the king. However, all on earth who do not belong to the kingdom of God, Gentiles as well as Jews, are similarly rebels. See the exposition.

10. What happened when the king returned? What does that represent?

The faithful servants were rewarded, the unfaithful servant was condemned and lost what he had, and the rebellious citizens were slaughtered.

Exposition

The nobleman represents Jesus Christ. Here the Lord is telling the disciples that he is returning to heaven to receive the kingdom from his Father and that he will return again. Luke, who wrote these words of Christ, must have remembered them when he wrote down the angels' words to the apostles after Christ ascended to heaven:

Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven. *Acts 1:11*

The servants represent Christians.

Although this parable and the previous parable are similar in many ways, a mina probably does not represent the exact same thing a talent did. For reasons laid out in the answer to question 6, I believe a mina represents the Word of God, in particular the basic gospel message—the word of the kingdom—as given to each Christian to speak to whomever God brings his way. We all have the same message to make known to our relatives, neighbors, friends, and acquaintances—we all have one mina.

If we are honest with ourselves we must admit that we don't share the gospel very often when we have opportunity. Are we wicked servants?

The wicked servant was not cast into hell, but was deprived of a reward. Consider 1 Corinthians 3:11-15:

For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

The rebellious citizens were the Jews who rejected Christ as their Messiah and king. The Greek word rendered *citizens* in the ESV means just that: they were not “alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise” like the Gentiles (Ephesians 2:12); they were part of God's people. But in just a few days they would reject their true king and their leaders would tell Pilate that they had no king but Caesar (John 19:15).

When the nobleman, now a king, returned, he would slay his enemies. This tells us that when Christ returns he will order those who reject him to suffer eternal punishment. We have learned that truth already from many of the parables we have studied.

We ought not to comfort ourselves that Jesus was speaking here primarily of the Jews. Today every baptized Christian is part of the visible church, part of the kingdom of God on earth. Those nominal Christians who rebel against him are as guilty as the Jews who rejected him two thousand years ago and will suffer the same fate.

Furthermore, the Apostle Paul said he was charged with bringing about the *obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all nations* (Romans 1:5). All human souls—Jews, baptized Christians, and all others—are to turn to Jesus in repentance and faith. He is God's anointed Prophet, Priest, and King. They may not be “citizens,” members of the church, the kingdom of God on earth, but they are rebellious *subjects*, and they will suffer the just wrath of God.

Don't be a rebel against God's anointed King. Turn to Jesus Christ, so that you may be part of his *eternal* kingdom.