

The Parables *of* Jesus

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Previous edition published in 2001.

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PREFACE TO 2003 EDITION

This book contains informal expositions on several biblical parables to derive from them some principles for Christian living. Although the parables included are richer in meaning than how these chapters present them, it is not the purpose of this book to perform an exhaustive study.

The first chapter of this book focuses on several relevant preliminary issues, such as the nature, purpose, and interpretation of parables. We will discuss the parables themselves in the subsequent chapters.

When revising the text, I have focused on correcting theological errors and making stylistic improvements, rather than adding to the breadth and depth of the book. As it is, this book fails to display the full richness of the parables and their theological implications. If given the opportunity, perhaps I will remedy this in future expositions of these and other parables.

1. ON PARABLES

The Old Testament was written in the Hebrew language, but by the time Jesus was born there was a Greek translation of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint because it was produced by seventy scholars. The Septuagint is often represented by LXX in books and commentaries.

Now, the Hebrew word for parable is *masal*, and is used thirty-nine times in the Old Testament. In twenty-eight of those thirty-nine instances, the Greek word used to translate *masal* is *parabole*. In other words, the Hebrew word for parable, or *masal* is used thirty-nine times in the original manuscripts of the Old Testament, and out of those thirty-nine times, the Greek word *parabole* is used to translate twenty-eight instances of this word in the LXX. From observing the instances of *masal* being translated as *parabole*, one may derive the range of meanings for the word "parable."

Although this tells you how some scholars have arrived at their definitions of a parable, differing scholars may use slightly different definitions, and therefore what seems to be a parable to one may not appear so to another. However, the disagreements are seldom so significant as to render communication and meaningful study impossible.

The Greek word for parable is *parabole* – it is a compound Greek word meaning "to set along side." In biblical usage, a parable compares or contrasts an earthly reality and a spiritual truth. And so when reading the Gospels, you will sometimes see Jesus saying such things as, "The kingdom of Heaven is like..." (Matthew 13:24), or "What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to?" (Luke 13:18).

Why use parables at all? One popular but mistaken explanation is that Jesus used them to make spiritual truths easier for his audience to understand. You may hear some preachers say, "God always makes things simple. For example, Jesus used parables while he was speaking to the masses. He used things out of their daily lives to explain spiritual truths to them."

Some preachers encourage their fellow-ministers to be more imaginative and entertaining in communicating spiritual truths by using narratives and parables in their sermons. However, the apostles themselves never followed Christ's practice of using parables, indicating that it is unnecessary for today's ministers to use so-called creative methods in preaching. Jesus had a distinct purpose in using parables, and it was not to make spiritual truths easier to understand. In our presentations, it is best to communicate biblical knowledge through structured expositions, the very method that many people today consider too dull and unimaginative.¹

¹ See Vincent Cheung, *Preach the Word*.

Let me explain why it is wrong to say that Jesus used parables to make spiritual truths easier to understand.

In the first place, his disciples did not understand even the foundational parable until Jesus explained it to them. After telling his audience the parable of the sower in Mark 4:2-9, his disciples come to him in verse 10, asking for the interpretation: "When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables." Even his closest disciples, including the Twelve, did not understand the parable.

Jesus replies, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?" (Mark 4:13). The parable of the sower is a foundational parable, and Jesus says here that failing to understand this one implies that one would also fail to understand all the other parables. However, even the twelve apostles did not understand this parable until it was explained to them. Therefore, it is a mistake to say that Jesus used parables to make spiritual truths easier to understand, since even those who should have understood it failed to do so. But the disciples appear to have no problem understanding the explanation to the parable, given in plain speech.

Some people claim that spiritual truths are in fact more difficult to understand if given in plain speech, without using parables or allegories. But I wonder how anyone who has ever heard or communicated any spiritual truth can sincerely assert this. In John 16:29-30, the disciples themselves state that it was easier to understand what Jesus was saying when he spoke "plainly" *rather than* using "figures of speech": "Then Jesus' disciples said, 'Now you are speaking clearly and without figures of speech. Now we can see that you know all things and that you do not even need to have anyone ask you questions. This makes us believe that you came from God.'"²

Verse 29 shows that proverbs, parables, and figures of speech do not necessarily make spiritual truths easier to understand; rather, they often obscure spiritual truths until the explanations are given in plain speech. The disciples obviously preferred direct and non-metaphorical language.

To paraphrase, the disciples are saying to Jesus, "You have stopped using figures of speech, parables, and proverbs. Instead, you are speaking plainly and without ambiguity. Because of this, now we understand what you are saying. And upon understanding what you are saying, now we have an even greater recognition of the divine insights in your words, so much so that we realize that we know all things, and believe that you have been sent by God."

Since it is through plain speech that Jesus was able to reveal his greatness to his disciples, this implies that figurative speech often obscures his greatness. When Jesus spoke in parables, many people in the audience could not understand him, and therefore failed to appreciate the breadth and depth of divine insights in his words. But when Jesus spoke plainly, those who heard could more readily recognize the knowledge and authority he possessed.

² "Figures of speech" (NIV) here can refer to "proverbs" (KJV) or parables.

Not only did the disciples fail to understand the foundational parable, but they also failed to understand many of the other parables. Matthew 13:34-36 says:

Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: "I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world." Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field."

The disciples not only failed to understand the parable of the sower, but also the parable of the weeds in the field.

Since John 16:29-30 shows that the disciples found the teachings of Jesus easy to understand only when he spoke in plain speech instead of in parables, it is probable that they had failed to understand many or most of the parables that Jesus spoke until he gave them the correct interpretations to those parables. But the vast majority of his hearers never had the opportunity to hear those explanations, since Jesus expounded them in private to his closest disciples.

The disciples appeared to recognize that, like themselves, the people could not understand the parables of Jesus, and so they asked Jesus why he used them: "The disciples came to him and asked, 'Why do you speak to the people in parables?'" (Matthew 13:10). In other words, they were saying, "Why do you speak to them in parables? Why don't you just tell them what you want to say? Why do you have to obscure your meaning through the use of parables?"

Then, Jesus himself admitted that the use of parables would prevent many people from understanding his teachings, and that this was his very intention:

He replied, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them....This is why I speak to them in parables: 'Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.' In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.'" (Matthew 13:11, 13-14)

Jesus used parables mainly not to make spiritual truths easier to understand; rather, the very opposite was true, so that at least one of the reasons he used parables was to obscure the meaning of his teachings.

Returning to Matthew 13:13-14: "This is why I speak to them in parables: 'Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.' In them is

fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.'" So Jesus used parables as the means by which he would hide spiritual truths from those whom God had ordained to remain unenlightened. In contrast, Jesus spoke in parables so that by means of *the explanations* of these parables to selected individuals, he would grant spiritual understanding to those whom God had ordained to be enlightened.

Parables require much thought in order to grasp their meaning. A person who really sought after God would seek, strive, think, and ask until he could find the meaning to the parable. And then he would chew upon the meaning, drawing all the meaning he could out of the parable so that he could learn everything possible about God...Jesus wanted the truth concealed from closed minds...the carnal were not willing to take the time or effort required to search out the meaning of the parable. Jesus actually said that He wanted the meaning hidden from the closed minded.³

If God has opened your mind to his word (Acts 16:14), then you will sincerely and diligently seek him by intently thinking on the words of Scripture, and this is the means by which God will grant you more spiritual understanding. As Paul writes, "Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this" (2 Timothy 2:7).

In this way, parables may help the spiritual growth of one who seeks God, since this person needs to immerse himself into the parables and their explanations. On the other hand, these parables will hinder a person whose mind has not been opened by God, since this person will not sincerely and diligently seek spiritual understanding like the one whose mind has been opened by God.

However, if the "parables require much thought in order to grasp their meaning," why do many people think that they are easy to understand? Also, if the parables are so difficult, why would anyone assume that Jesus used them to make spiritual truths easier to understand?⁴

The answer is that the parables appear to be easier to understand than they really are because the Bible includes the interpretations to many of them, and these explanations were not available to those who first heard the parables, with the exception of Jesus' closest disciples.

For example, after relating the parable of the sower, the Bible also includes its interpretation. In the passage, Jesus talks about a person sowing seeds into the ground, but since there are different kinds of soil, and the seeds performed differently on each kind. After this, when he is alone with his disciples, he explains that the seed was the

³ *Practical Word Studies in the New Testament, Vol. 2*; Alpha-Omega Ministries, Inc., 1998; p.1500-1501.

⁴ In any case, many of those who think that the parables are easy to understand often misinterpret them in the first place.

word of God, and the different kinds of soil represent the different inner conditions in people.

Without this explanation, how are we supposed to know that the seed is really the word of God? It is conceivable that the seed could represent other things besides the word of God without damaging the story's coherence. Without a direct explanation, one may not be able to tell what a parable means. Although no explicit interpretations are given for some of the parables in the Bible, the Gospels place them within definite contexts, making it possible to understand them. Given the proper contexts, the meanings of some parables become obvious (see Mark 12:12) even without explicit explanations.

Although there are basic principles that one must observe when reading any part of the Bible, such as respecting the context of the passage, there are principles specific to understanding the parables.

Each parable contains one main idea. Once we have discovered it, it should govern our interpretation and application of the parable. Although some have argued that some parables contain several main ideas, we can be certain that it is a mistake to derive numerous doctrines and applications from each parable. But many Christians make this error.

Not every detail in a parable symbolizes something. Many people go through each parable trying to find what each object or person in the parable represents: "What does this stand for? What does that stand for?" Sometimes a certain object or person does not represent anything doctrinally significant by itself. It is there simply as part of the story.

Let me give you two examples. The first one comes from Matthew 22:10-13, which reads as follows:

So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. "Friend," he asked, "how did you get in here without wedding clothes?" The man was speechless. Then the king told the attendants, "Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Some Christians interpret the "wedding clothes" in this parable as water baptism, concluding that a person is not saved without having been baptized in water. They also assert that the custom of the early church was to provide the baptismal candidates with white robes, and these are as the wedding clothes in this parable. But scholars can find no evidence that such a custom existed, and there is no indication that the "wedding clothes" in the parable refer to water baptism.

Based on this parable alone, no one can assert that one will suffer everlasting punishment in hell if he professes Christ without also being baptized in water. In fact, we have no indication that any part of it even addresses the topic of baptism. To say otherwise is to impose one's theological presuppositions upon the passage.

Another example comes from Luke 10:27-37, or the parable of the Good Samaritan:

He answered: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Augustine interpreted this parable as follows: the man is Adam; Jerusalem is the heavenly city; Jericho is the moon, representing mortality; the robbers are Satan and the demons; stripping the man of his clothes represents removing man's immortality; beating him represents causing him to sin; the priest and the Levite are the priesthood and the religious system of the Old Testament; the Samaritan is Jesus; binding the wounds represents the restraint of sin; the oil and the wine represent hope and encouragement; the animal is the Incarnation; the inn is the church; the next day is after the resurrection of Christ; the innkeeper represents the apostle Paul; the two silver coins are the two commandments of love; and the promise to pay if more is spent is the promise of the life to come.

To say the least, this interpretation is extremely improbable. Depending on one's theological presuppositions, one may force the objects in the parable to represent different things, and seemingly without destroying the coherence of the story. To the Pentecostal, the oil may be regeneration and the wine may be the baptism of the Holy Spirit. To the dispensationalist, the two coins may represent two thousand years.

However, there is no legitimate basis from which to assert any of this. Thus we should avoid trying to make every object in the parable represent something; rather, we should focus on identifying the main thrust of the parable. In this case, Jesus is answering the question, "Who is my neighbor?" The context should set the boundaries for interpretation.

You may have been to Bible study groups where people would take turns to express their opinions about the passages they are studying. You might have heard them say, "I think this means...", "To me this means...", or "The Holy Spirit shows me that this means...", when in reality they have no idea what the passages mean. Such shameful displays can be seen in every session, and the parables of Jesus are not immune to their abuse.

If a Bible study group does not have a knowledgeable leader, or if the leader is there only to maintain order, then it may quickly degenerate into a place that encourages ignorant and subjective opinions concerning the things of God. No genuine edification takes place; rather, numerous contradictory interpretations are offered, all of which may be mistaken, resulting in great confusion. But to avoid offending anyone, no interpretation is denounced as false. Such a group serves no constructive purpose and should be either restructured or disbanded. Such blatant abuse of the Scripture, where biblical passages are reduced to vehicles for expressing one's private opinions, must cease for true spiritual growth to occur.

Peter warns that ignorant and unstable people distort the Scripture to their own destruction (2 Peter 3:16). Many Christians covet the privilege of being heard, but disdain the responsibility of preparing themselves for intelligent discussions through vigorous theological studies. Those who are not qualified to offer meaningful contributions to a biblical discussion should remain silent, and learn from others until they begin to mature in their understanding. Biblical interpretation is not a democratic discipline, where everyone's opinion counts. As Ecclesiastes 5:1-3 says:

Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong. Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. As a dream comes when there are many cares, so the speech of a fool when there are many words.

In addition, James 3:1 says, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly." Considering the lack of accurate biblical knowledge in Christians nowadays, most of them should not presume to be teachers, but should rather remain silent at church, until their ignorance of and unfaithfulness to Scripture have been remedied.

2. ON HEARING

The parables on hearing the word of God probably constitute the most important kind of parables. Since they teach us how to properly hear the word of God, following the principles that they teach will enable us to properly hear the other parables, and also the other portions of Scripture that are not parables.

We will start with the parable of the sower. Matthew 13:3-9 relates the parable as follows:

Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop – a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear."

Then, in verses 19-23, Jesus gives the following explanation:

When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.

Thus the sower is the person who distributes, publishes, or preaches the word of God. People who listen to the word of God are represented by different types of ground or soil, in which the word of God takes effect in different ways. There are four types of ground:

1. The path: "As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up."

2. The rocky places: "Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root."
3. The thorns: "Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants."
4. The good soil: "Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop – a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."

The importance of this parable becomes evidence when Jesus says to his disciples, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?" (Mark 4:13). This indicates that this is a foundational parable, and understanding it will enable you to properly hear God's word, which in turn will enable you to properly hear the other parables, as well as the rest of Scripture. On the other hand, if you fail to understand even this parable, you will have difficulty understanding the other parables.

Not many professing Christians are spiritually productive, but most of them wish that they were. The parable of the sower gives us the foundation to spiritual productivity, showing us that the key to bearing fruit is hearing the word of God with the right inner condition. Now, there are four types of ground in the parable, but only the fourth managed to produce. Thus although hearing the word of God is the key to fruitfulness, many people hear the word of God without bearing fruit because they have the wrong inner conditions.

This parable lists several reasons why a person may hear the word but fail to be spiritually productive.

Verse 19 says, "When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path." If you hear the word of God but fail to understand it, then the word of God will not bear fruit in you, and your spiritual life will remain barren.

When a seed is sown "along the path," it does not enter into the soil so that it may take root and grow. Similarly, a person who hears the word of God but does not understand what he hears will fail to retain or apply it. Then, the "evil one comes" and takes away the word of God from him. If the word of God is not absorbed by the mind through understanding, it is likely to be lost, just like how a dream may slip away after one wakes up in the morning. It can be as if the person has never heard God's word at all.

Then, verses 20-21 say, "The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he

quickly falls away." These two verses refers to a person who is agreeable to the word of God, but since the word has never taken root in his heart so that it may transform him, he has no strength to retain what he has heard. When problems and persecutions come, "he quickly falls away."

If the word of God does not take root in your life so that it transforms and restructures your mind, then you will find it difficult to continue affirming and obeying what you have heard when people and circumstances test your stance. This is a very common problem. Many people appear to be excited about the teachings of Scripture, but their commitment often fails to withstand even the smallest tests. Those who are like this will quickly fall away.

Being too concerned with worldly things is also a common reason for spiritual barrenness. Verse 22 says, "The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful." If you allow the things of this world to dominate your thinking, you will be spiritually unfruitful. As Jesus says elsewhere, "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money...For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:24, 21). You may claim to agree with the words of Jesus, that "a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15), but do you really believe this?

Paul writes, "No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs – he wants to please his commanding officer" (2 Timothy 2:4). Psalm 19 reminds us that the fear of God and the word of God are "more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb" (v. 9-10). Many professing Christians are still focused on seeking wealth rather than knowledge about God, because they do not really believe that the fear of God and the word of God are worth more than gold. On the other hand, Scripture testifies that only knowledge about God is a worthy end:

This is what the LORD says: "Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight," declares the LORD. (Jeremiah 9:23-24)

In contrast to the above defective grounds, the "good soil" in the parable "stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop" (Luke 8:15). A person whose heart is as good soil not only "understands" what he hears (Matthew 13:23), but he faithfully endures persecution and affliction without compromising the understanding given to him – "by persevering," he "[produces] a crop." God's word is not suffocated in him because worldly affairs do not dominate his thinking. He has "a noble and good heart."

Therefore, the person who becomes spiritually productive through hearing God's word has the following characteristics: he understands what he hears, he endures through difficulties, and he is spiritually-minded instead of worldly-minded. A spiritually productive person understands and persists in the biblical truths that he learns from Scripture. By God's grace, these biblical truths have altered his thought life, resulting in substantial changes in his behavior. He refuses to allow the world to define his priorities. He is being transformed by the word of God (Romans 12:2).

A person may sometimes suffer hardship because he has committed himself to believing and obeying the biblical truths that he has learned. Those without endurance may compromise their faith, and therefore become spiritually barren. But God does not leave us unprotected. The biblical truths themselves constitute the very weapons with which you can overcome the opposition and pressure. God has given you "the shield of faith" and "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Ephesians 6:16-17).

Matthew 13:9 is both instructive and sobering: "He who has ears, let him hear." Many of those who hear the word of God will not make the appropriate changes to their lives. Although some of them may appear to receive the word of God with joy (Matthew 13:20), they will not retain or obey what they hear. These will remain barren. On the other hand, those who hear and obey will become spiritually fruitful. As Jesus says in Matthew 7:24-27:

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.

The foolish person does not take the Scripture seriously enough to retain and obey it, but the wise person will restructure his entire life according to scriptural teachings, and builds all his thinking and conduct upon the solid rock of biblical revelation.

Our discussion on hearing the word of God continues with a study of the parable of the seed as recorded in Mark 4:26-29. Since the context of this passage follows Mark's account of the parable of the sower, we may continue to see the "seed" as the word of God, and may apply the parable to the hearing of the word of God and spiritual growth. That said, this parable applies to how the kingdom of God grows in general. Initially, the kingdom of God carries only a small influence in this world but then it expands and gains strength (see Mark 4:30-32). Thus, the kingdom of God as a whole is like a seed, but at this time we will apply this to the spiritual life of an individual.

There can be no genuine change or growth in a person's life without hearing the word of God, just as it is impossible to produce a crop without first planting the seeds. Since

hearing occupies such an important place, we must heed the warnings of Jesus to "consider carefully *what* you hear" (Mark 4:24) and to "consider carefully *how* you listen" (Luke 8:18). We must be careful about the seeds that go into the soil of our mind, and also be careful about how we hear – that is, to examine what kind of soil we are. The seed must be right, and the soil must be right. In other words, we need to be careful about the ideas that enter into our minds, and also be careful about how we process those ideas.

The parable of the seed is as follows:

This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain – first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come. (Mark 4:26-29)

Great spiritual growth usually does not come suddenly or in spurts, although that sometimes happens. A seed in the soil grows in stages: "First the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head." So it is with spiritual growth – one does not immediately become a "full kernel in the head." Since this is the case, spiritual growth cannot be measured or perceived on a daily basis. Sometimes God grants us tremendous growth within a very short time, but that is the exception and not the norm. By saying that spiritual growth is gradual, we are not saying that it has to be slow, since the term also applies to consistent rapid growth. But we are speaking of a process, whether slow or rapid.

When the seed first germinates and begins to grow underground, it is not perceptible to the observer. But the seed is still growing. Similarly, spiritual growth at first occurs below the surface of your immediate consciousness, and you may be unable to perceive any progress on any given day. But if the word of God is indeed transforming and restructuring your inner self, then you are growing in the spirit whether or not you can feel it or measure it on any given day. You may not be able to detect any progress in a week or even a month, but if you look back over a period of a year or several years, you will notice significant differences.

Many preachers maintain that Christians must grow spiritually everyday. In a typical sermon, they may say something like, "Today, you must have more understanding, more wisdom, more love, more patience, more dedication, more holiness than yesterday. Otherwise, there is something amiss in your spiritual life." Although we must advance daily in our Christian life, statements like these can be misleading. It is not always easy to tell whether one has been growing spiritually over a very short period of time. There is no cause for alarm if you do not notice any spiritual growth in yourself over the past day or week. However, if there is no detectable progress over the past several months, then this is an indication that something has gone wrong.

The parable tells us that the soil produces grain "all by itself." Although spiritual growth appears to require much effort from you, the pivotal element is the interaction between your mind and God's word. Paul writes:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? Have you suffered so much for nothing – if it really was for nothing? Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard? (Galatians 3:1-5)

Referring to his initial encounter with the Galatians, he is saying to them, in effect, "Were you regenerated and converted by observing the law or by believing what you heard?" Then, he says in verse 3, "Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?" Although God expects us to strive and struggle in sanctification, spiritual perfection does not come by human effort. Even any valid striving or struggling by us comes from the energy that God supplies by his Holy Spirit (Colossians 1:29).

God saved you not because you have been good, but he arranged for you to hear the gospel message and regenerated you by his sovereign will. Spiritual growth after conversion is still based on hearing the word of God and his sovereign work in our minds.

Luke 10:38-42 relates an incident concerning Mary and Martha that illustrates the priority of hearing the word of God.

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Jesus says, "Only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her." What was Mary doing that was so commendable? What was this one thing that was "needed"? She was sitting "at the Lord's feet listening to what he said." On the other hand, Martha "was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made." Those who are very active in doing good works will often think that they are superior to

and complain against those who choose to give hearing the word of God first place in their lives. But those who are hearing the word of God have "chosen what is better."

Some Christians think that they have God's approval because of their abundance of good works, and despise those who make biblical and theological studies their priority. They give great emphasis to prayer, evangelism, and helping the needy. However, without an accurate and comprehensive knowledge of the word of God, they cannot know how to properly perform these activities. Without God's word to judge and govern all our thoughts and actions, we may only assume that our "good" works are truly good based on our good intentions alone, but without scriptural justification.

Against much of popular thinking, the Bible asserts the priority of the ministry of the word – preaching and hearing biblical doctrines – over the ministries of prayer, evangelism, counseling, music, charity, and all the rest. The latter ministries must all be founded on and governed by the Scripture; otherwise, they are not legitimate ministries at all.

Jesus said, "Mary has chosen what is better, and *it will not be taken away from her.*" Rather than exhorting Christians to spend more time in prayer and evangelism at the expense of hearing the word of God, we should give priority to the study of biblical doctrines, and let prayer, evangelism, and other ministries be the effects of our having heard and received the word of God. Such good works will come from the divine energy of the Holy Spirit, and not by the strength of the flesh.

Spiritual progress depends on the life of the seed, not the efforts of the farmer. Some details pertaining to farming, such as plowing and cultivating, have been omitted from this parable, because its emphasis is that growth comes from the life in the seed. Of course, we know that the ground needs to be plowed and watered, but "neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow" (1 Corinthians 3:7). Spiritual growth does not come through your fleshly efforts, but it comes from an act of God giving life to us by means of his word.

Of course, this does not give anyone an excuse for laziness or indifference concerning spiritual things. 2 Timothy 2:15 says, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth" (NASB). In other words, work hard to present yourself approved to God by being diligent to achieve accurate biblical knowledge. Now, since we are saying that spiritual growth and productivity come from the activity of God in the mind by means of his word, and since we are also saying that this does not in any way make diligence unnecessary, it is most relevant to discuss the role of diligent research and study when it comes to biblical interpretation.

Especially important to our own day is to note that, although illumination by the Holy Spirit is crucial to accurate biblical interpretation, such illumination often comes only by means of and on occasions of a diligent study of and reflection on the Scripture, and not by a passive reception of information from the Spirit.

Of course the Spirit has a role in Bible interpretation. It is easy for a non-Christian – one who is without the Spirit – to distort the meaning of Scripture, for "no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3). It is unreasonable to expect one who is blinded by Satan (2 Corinthians 4:4), and who perceives his world almost entirely through anti-Christian presuppositions, to handle the Scripture without distortion or prejudice.

In addition, God has given some Christians greater wisdom and knowledge than others. For example, God gave Paul wisdom, so that from him came insights that even Peter admits as "hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:15-16). Luke describes Apollos as "a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord..." (Acts 18:24-25). Indeed, God has called some to be "teachers" (1 Corinthians 12:28-29; Ephesians 4:11), and not all are gifted by God through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to fulfill such roles. Therefore, we acknowledge the role of the Holy Spirit in Bible interpretation,

On the other hand, we condemn the subjective, irrational, anti-intellectual, and passive approaches that many professing Christians assume toward the Bible, and which they often attribute to the guidance of the Spirit. They assume that to understand the Bible, they need only to read passages from it, clear their mind of distractions and thoughts, and the Holy Spirit will reveal tremendous insights to him. Such a mystical approach has generated major heresies, but it seems that many professing Christians assume that this is the right way to "study" the Bible.

They consider reflections, discussions, debates, commentaries, textbooks, and the like as unspiritual and inferior means to attain spiritual understanding. Theologians are considered the enemies of Christianity and doctrinal preaching is despised as boring and irrelevant, even though these are what have been keeping the church alive in a world that is hostile to its ideas. They are our hope for regaining the superior position in academic discussions, which generate and propagate ideas that eventually trickle down to the masses to direct history and civilization. As J. P. Moreland observes:

We allow one another to get away with applying an understanding of a passage that is based on vague feelings or first impressions and not on the hard work of reading commentaries and using study tools such as concordances, Bible dictionaries, and the like. Why? Because a careful exercise of reason is not important in understanding what the Bible says for many of us....

Because of the Bible's nature, serious study is needed to grasp what it says. Of course, the Scripture contains easily grasped portions that are fairly straightforward. But some of it is very difficult, intellectually speaking....The more a person develops the mind and the understanding of hermeneutics...the more he or she

will be able to understand the meaning and significance of the Scriptures.

Unfortunately, many today apparently think that hard intellectual work is not needed to understand God's propositional revelation to us. Instead, they believe that the Holy Spirit will simply make known the meaning of a text if implored to do so. Tragically, this represents a misunderstanding of the Spirit's role in understanding the Scriptures....⁵

Returning to the parable, we should diligently pursue spiritual progress, but it is God's word understood and believed in our minds that lead to our spiritual maturity. This is why the one who plants and waters is almost left out of the parable. The farmer in the parable merely observes the growth, and does not cause or aid the growth. Although the Bible teaches us to be diligent, and to strive and struggle to in pursuing sanctification, it says that even our diligence comes only from the sovereign work of God: "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:12-13). This is so that God alone receives all the glory.

Ministers should promote spiritual growth through the word of God and not through their fleshly efforts. In their eagerness to promote spiritual growth and activity in their congregations, many pastors exert themselves in promoting evangelistic programs, prayer meetings, and other church programs. Although these things may be good, our focus should be in promoting spiritual growth among the people by the preaching of the word of God. Promote the word of God instead of spiritual activities as such. Teach them to be like Mary first, that they should sit at the Lord's feet and hear his word, and then they will go out and properly perform their spiritual duties.

Mark 4:29 says, "As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come." At first the seed is in the ground, and you cannot even see it, but eventually the harvest will come, and you will reap the benefits of it. Likewise, spiritual growth is initially hidden, but it will eventually become publicly observable. The kingdom of God is such that what one does in secret will in time be evident to all. God will publicly reward those who are faithful to him in private.

Paul says in 1 Timothy 4:15, "Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress." And he writes in 1 Timothy 5:24-25, "The sins of some men are obvious, reaching the place of judgment ahead of them; the sins of others trail behind them. In the same way, good deeds are obvious, and even those that are not cannot be hidden." The wicked and righteous deeds that are now hidden will eventually be manifested.

⁵ J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God With All Your Mind*; Colorado Springs, Colorado: Navpress, 1997; p. 26, 45-47.

3. ON PRAYER

The first parable on prayer that we will examine comes from Luke 11:5-10, where Jesus begins by saying, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him'" (v. 5-6). In those days, it was a great embarrassment and dishonor to fail to have the right things set before your guests when they visit. Even the poor would attempt to treat their guests as nicely as possible.

The man in this parable faces potential embarrassment because he does not have the needed items to properly treat his guests. So, he went to a friend's house and says, "Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him." But his friend from within the house answers him, saying, "Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything" (v. 7).

At that time, the common people lived in one-room houses. An entire family lived in the same room, and the floor was made of mud. The inhabitants would step on the mud so many times that it became a hard floor. If this man gets up and walks around the house to find bread for his friend, he would get his feet dirty and may even awaken the rest of his family.

In addition, the door has been shut. During the day, the door would usually be opened. When the door is shut, it indicates that the family desires privacy, or that the family has gone to bed. This is the case in this parable: "Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything." In other words, this person is asking his friend to do something that would be a great inconvenience.

Jesus concludes the parable by saying, "I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs" (v. 8). Then, he applies the parable to our prayer life, saying, "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened" (v. 9-10).

Our next parable concerns a widow and an unrighteous judge:

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' For some time he

refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:1-8)

Some parables make comparisons, and others are for contrasts. In these two parables, God is not said to be similar to the reluctant friend or the unrighteous judge, but as one who is much more willing and generous than they (Luke 11:9-13, 18:6-8).

The point is that if the reluctant friend would grant a persistent friend's request even when it is inconvenient, and if the unrighteous judge would grant a persistent widow's petition even when it is contrary to his own dispositions and interests, how much more will a loving and generous God grant the persistent requests of those whom he has chosen for salvation?

Luke 11:9-13 says:

So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!

This passage follows immediately after our first parable. Thus Jesus does not say that God is like the reluctant friend, so that if you bother him long enough, and that if you shamelessly intrude into his life in the middle of the night, then even though he will not answer your prayer on the basis that he is your heavenly Father, he will nevertheless grant your request on the basis of your persistence. Rather, Jesus is saying that if a reluctant friend would grant a person's request because of his persistence, how much more will a loving and generous God grant your request, if you will pray with persistence?

Jesus also comments on the second parable. He says, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (Luke

18:6-8). God will see that his chosen ones get justice quickly.⁶ He will not delay. God is not like the unrighteous judge in his dealings with us.

On the basis of the above explanation, we may summarize several points about prayer that these parables teach us.

Jesus says in Luke 11:8, "I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's *boldness* he will get up and give him as much as he needs." The word translated "boldness" (NASB: "persistence") in this verse means to be shameless. The man is not embarrassed to intrude into his friend's life and ask for what he needs. He refuses to allow the customs of the day to prevent him from asking for what he needs. Jesus explains that the reluctant friend would grant his request not because he is his friend, but because of his persistent boldness and shamelessness.

If even a reluctant person eventually capitulates, how much more will God answer our prayers, seeing that he is not reluctant, but rather eager to fulfill all that he wills in our lives? Thus Hebrews 4:16 encourages us to approach God with our prayers: "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

God has no human limitations such as the reluctant friend does in the first parable. He will not say, "Do not trouble me. I cannot get up because I have already shut the door," or, "My children have already gone to bed, please come back tomorrow." Rather, Scripture says:

He will not let your foot slip – he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The LORD watches over you – the LORD is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. The LORD will keep you from all harm – he will watch over your life; the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore. (Psalm 121:3-8)

In addition, God has no evil dispositions such as the unrighteous judge has in the second parable. He will not withhold justice or refrain from answering you due to any malice or injustice. As Jesus says, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32), and regarding those chosen by God, he says, "I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly" (Luke 18:7-8).

Jesus teaches us to be persistent in prayer. In the parable of the unrighteous judge, he says, "For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'" (Luke 18:4-5). The widow in the parable is not deterred even though she faces an unrighteous judge.

⁶ Within the historical context of the passage, this parable may be referring to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD. Here we are making a more general use of the parable to address prayer itself.

Corruption was rampant in the legal process at that time. Bribery was almost a necessity if a person wanted his case to successfully go through, and for the judge to decide in his favor. A person such as the widow had almost no chance of obtaining what she needed, because she probably would not have had the money to give a meaningful bribe to the judge. Nevertheless, her persistence compelled even this judge to grant her justice.

This is to illustrate verse 1, which states the context and intent of the parable: "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up" (Luke 18:1). We must persist in prayer despite doubting thoughts, critical relatives, and negative circumstances. Jesus assures us that God is responsive to the cries of his elect.

God is not like the reluctant friend in the first parable, nor is he like the unrighteous judge in the second parable. Rather, he is generous toward us and quick to avenge us. "However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8).

4. ON FORGIVENESS

We will begin this chapter with a familiar parable – the parable of the Prodigal Son. It is recorded in Luke 15:11-32 as follows:

There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, "Father, give me my share of the estate." So he divided his property between them.

Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

When he came to his senses, he said, "How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men." So he got up and went to his father.

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

The son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

But the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." So they began to celebrate.

Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. "Your brother has come," he replied, "and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound."

The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!"

"My son," the father said, "you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

Sin alienates a person from God, and drives the person to live in such a way that is not pleasing to God. One who is living a sinful lifestyle will often spend less time praying, going to church, reading the Bible and worthwhile Christian books, ministering to others, and seeking God in general (v. 13-16). So a sinful lifestyle leads a person into spiritual poverty: "After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need" (v. 14). The younger son takes part of his father's wealth, leaves him, and squanders it. Then comes a famine, and he begins to suffer lack. However, his father is not impoverished, and those who remain in the father's household are not affected. Likewise, although God has all riches, those among his elect who have yet to repent suffer spiritual poverty just as if they are not part of the father's household.

Sin corrupts and erodes a person's heart, and his thoughts and actions evidence signs of spiritual decay and filth: "So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything" (v. 15-16). The Jews considered feeding pigs as the lowest occupation that one could have, but we see in verse 16 that this younger son even "longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything." Besides having to perform the lowest sort of work that a Jewish mind could imagine, he has fallen to such a low point that he envies the pigs. The animals are apparently enjoying better meals than he.

We begin to see a turnaround in this younger son's life in verse 17: "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!'" Note the words, "When he came to his senses." Paul calls those who sin to wake up from their slumber:

The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think

about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature. (Romans 13:11-14)

Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character." Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God – I say this to your shame. (1 Corinthians 15:33-34)

For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible. This is why it is said: "Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. (Ephesians 5:12-16)

The first indication of repentance is that the person begins to see his own wretched condition. The unrepentant is said to be in a spiritual stupor, and the preaching of the gospel is to awake the elect. It is God who causes them to remain in this state of stupor as long as he wills, and the non-elect will never be awakened. As Paul writes, "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day" (Romans 11:8). People repent not because they awake to righteousness by their own power, since they have no such power, but they awaken because God awakes them by his sovereign power and by means of the gospel. Therefore, repentance itself is a gift – it is something that God may or may not grant to someone according to his will (2 Timothy 2:25).

The younger son says to himself, "How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death." Even the least among the faithful ones in the church are better off than those who are not in Christ. But not everybody thinks this way. At the beginning of the parable, the son thinks that it is better to take the father's wealth, leave the family, and do whatever he desires. Likewise, the Israelites whom Moses had led out of Egypt complained, "We were better off in Egypt!" (Numbers 11:18). But of course they were not better off in Egypt.

Many professing Christians are also like this, claiming that they were better off before they became Christians. If that seems to be true, it is often because of two reasons. First, they have never spiritually matured through study, prayer, and ministry. They are defeated and miserable because they are not doing anything spiritually meaningful. Second, some people think that their lives were better before they became Christians just because they have forgotten how bad their lives were.

The Israelites complained against God and Moses, saying, "If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death" (Exodus 16:3). They had forgotten that they were slaves! The Egyptians placed "slave

masters over them to oppress them with forced labor" (Exodus 1:11), and that was certainly not as good as being out in the desert with the presence and provisions of God. Through unbelief their minds were clouded, and they made an incorrect assessment of their situation.

Psalm 103:2 says, "Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits," but many professing Christians forget how bad their lives were before they were saved by God's sovereign grace. They dwell on all the "pleasures of sin" (Hebrews 11:25) that had them in Satan's snare before God "rescued [them] from the dominion of darkness and brought [them] into the kingdom of the Son he loves" (Colossians 1:13).

Since repentance is a decisive turning of the mind from sin and toward God, the first sign of genuine repentance is the ability to see one's true condition, just as the younger son "came to his senses" in verse 17. Then, he says in verse 18, "I will set out and go back to my father." One who begins to awaken from his spiritual stupor sees that it is better to be a faithful Christian than to wallow in sin, and that it is far better to be a believer than an unbeliever.

This person says to himself, "I have been a fool, as all non-Christians are fools. Atheism is irrational, Islam is false, Mormonism is heretical, Buddhism is stupid, and agnosticism is the empty excuse of a moron. I can now see that my salvation comes only from the Christian Scripture that reveals the only true God, and I will begin to seek him by the means that he has provided. So I will repent of my sins and seek his forgiveness. I will immerse myself in theological studies and in earnest prayer. I will go to church and hear biblical preaching. I will seek God with my whole heart."

The parable continues: "I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men" (v. 18-19). A truly repentant person is never boastful or demanding, because he sees and understands the truth. He realizes that he is in no position to demand anything of the one from whom he seeks mercy. "Grace expected or demanded is a contradiction in terms."⁷

One who is coming to God with true repentance relies on God's mercy alone. Just like one who is guilty of a crime and who has no defense against the charge may throw himself at the mercy of the court, one who is truly repentant says, "I can do nothing. I cannot undo what I have done. I cannot pay the debt that I have incurred. All I can do is to place my life in God's hands, and be at his mercy, and let him do whatever he wants with me." But even to place himself in God's hands comes about by a sovereign act of God, in which he changes the will of the sinner and grants him the gift of repentance.

This is what the younger son does in the parable. He says, "I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men." He realizes that he is in no position to demand anything from his father. He hopes that his father

⁷ Michael Horton, *Putting Amazing Back into Grace*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1994; p. 92.

would be merciful, and make him as one of his hired men. He dares not hope for anything more.

Then, we learn about the nature and the extent of God's forgiveness in verses 20-24. Verse 20 says, "So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him." God's forgiveness is active. Just as he has already chosen those whom he would save, at the time that he has chosen, he also actively reaches out to the sinner and causes him to repent. God does not passively wait for you to repent; if he does, you would never repent precisely because you are a sinner, and your will is fixed against him. But God by irresistible power changes the will of those whom he has chosen to receive salvation, and thus causing them to repent.

The apostle Paul observes that, "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." (Romans 3:10-12). And Jesus says in John 6:44, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day." If God were to wait until we repent by our own will and power, no one would be saved.

Not only is God actively reaching out to those whom he has chosen to save, forgiving them of their sins, but he instantly grants them sonship in Christ: "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet'" (v. 21-22). Those whom God causes to repent and to believe in Christ do not become slaves in the kingdom of God, but they are as sons in his house. In addition, God's pardon is complete: "Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate" (v. 23-24). One who lives in sin is as one who has died, but when he turns to God, he is brought back to life.

Then, Luke 15:25-30 shifts the attention to the older son:

Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. "Your brother has come," he replied, "and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound." The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!"

Luke 15 begins with the words, "Now the tax collectors and 'sinners' were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them'" (v. 1-2). Like the Pharisees, the older son becomes angry over how the repentant son is being treated. Of course, many of those whom the Pharisees considered sinners were in fact sinners. And the older son's accusations against the younger son are indeed correct.

The problem was that the Pharisees considered themselves spiritually superior because of their own outward behavior. But Jesus says, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean" (Matthew 23:27). Many falsely religious individuals place great emphasis and pride on their own works, but the words of Jesus apply to them just as much as anyone: "Unless you repent, you too will all perish" (Luke 13:3, 5). Some people tend to think that as long as they do not belong to what they perceive to be the worst group of sinners, they will do well. However, the Bible says that unless they repent, they will perish just like the worst of sinners. Only through the repentance and faith sovereignly granted by God could one be saved and accepted by God.

A self-righteous person is one who is indignant against the grace of God, because he depends on his own works to seek God's approval: "But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'" (v. 29-30).

Self-righteous people often think that they have done many good works, and that they have never committed any major sins. Therefore, they become indignant when one who has committed many sins receives forgiveness and restoration from God. A self-righteous person thinks that what he perceives to be his good works ought to earn God's approval. However, the Bible states that "all our righteous acts are like filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6), and that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

The older son says to the father, "But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!" (v. 30). A repentant sinner begins to perceive the truth concerning God, sin, and himself. In contrast, a self-righteous person is one who fails to comprehend the true nature of sin and grace. One who depends on his own works despises God's forgiveness as something that excuses sin, rather than recognizing it as a demonstration of his sovereign kindness and mercy.

Thus the older son says to his father, in effect, "You are rewarding my brother for his sin. He has taken your wealth and wasted it – he did no good with it, but spent it all on his own desires. After he has nothing left, he comes crawling back to you, and now instead of punishing him, you are rewarding him with this celebration! You are wrong. My brother's return does not deserve forgiveness and celebration, but that is what you are

giving him. I have been in this house, and I have never disobeyed you, but you have never given me so much as a goat."

Self-righteous people betray their misunderstanding that God's forgiveness is a reward for sin. But the Bible says, "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" (Romans 6:1-2). God's sovereign grace works to forgive, restore, and sanctify, not to give license to sin.

Verses 31-32 contain the father's reply to the older son: "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'" The older son fails to understand that it is not sin that we celebrate, but repentance. The father celebrates not because his son was lost, that he was as one dead, but he was rejoicing because something has changed in his son, that he has returned and repented of his past way of life. Likewise, God's forgiveness does not imply that he tolerates sin; rather, he rejoices in a person's repentance, that the person has come to his senses, and that he has come to place himself at the mercy of God, knowing that he has no merit of his own. Accordingly, Jesus says, "There is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10).

For our second parable on forgiveness, we will read from Matthew 18:21-35, where it is recorded the parable of the unforgiving servant:

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

"The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

"His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'

"But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

"Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

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

Whereas the first parable focuses on the way God forgives us, this parable, while giving us additional insights about the magnitude of God's forgiveness, focuses on how God wants us to forgive others.

Verse 24 says, "As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him." The translators of the NASB observe, "A talent was worth more than fifteen years' wages of a laborer." Thus the New Living Translation renders "ten thousand talents" as "millions of dollars." D. A. Carson points out that the debt may have been even greater:

We glimpse some idea of the size of the indebtedness when we recall that David donated three thousand talents of gold and seven thousand talents of silver for the construction of the temple, and the princes provided five thousand talents of gold and ten thousand talents of silver (1 Chronicles 29:4, 7). Some recent estimates suggest a dollar value of twelve million; but with inflation and fluctuating precious metal prices, this could be over a billion dollars in today's currency.⁸

Some sources say that Jesus could have meant either Attic or Jewish talents, but either one would amount to millions of dollars in today's terms. Since the first servant owes ten thousand talents, his debt amounts to more than one hundred fifty thousand years' worth of a common laborer's wage.

Something like what happens in this parable could have happened in that day. However, the amount that a servant would have owed his master was unlikely to be that high. It was unlikely that a servant would have needed or borrowed that much money, and it was unlikely that anyone would have kept lending money to a servant until he owed one hundred fifty thousand years' worth of wages.

⁸ *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984; p. 406.

Make no mistake about it – although it was unlikely for a person to have owed this amount of money to another person, each of us owed this amount and more to God. Therefore, although this may appear to be a hyperbole when compared to the people's natural life, since it is in fact referring to our relationship with God, it is rather an understatement. We often fail to recognize the extent of our sinfulness. That many can consider someone like Hitler as evil while considering themselves as essentially good betrays how humankind has been blinded to their own sinfulness.

Contrary to those who think that they are innocent before God, our debt to God is limitless, and it is one that we cannot pay: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). When speaking to people about their need for salvation, some may respond, "I don't need Jesus. I am not really that bad. Sure, I have made mistakes in my life, but in general, my good works outweigh my bad ones. And I can always do more good works to repay my debt." But the truth is that even one hundred fifty thousand years of good works will not repay what they owe to God. In fact, biblical teaching indicates that since non-Christians cannot perform deeds that are pleasing to God, what they consider to be their good works are in fact sinful deeds. Non-Christians cannot perform any good works at all.

Then, "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything'" (v. 26). What at first appears to be a responsible statement is in fact foolish and unrealistic. It is impossible for this servant to repay one hundred fifty thousand years' worth of wages, even if he earns much more than a common laborer. He cannot repay a small portion of the debt.

Our debt to God is too great for us to repay. Therefore, it is futile to approach God boasting about our abilities and past accomplishments, or promising good and better deeds. Rather, we must make ourselves completely vulnerable and place our lives at his mercy. Your debt to God is too great, so do not even try to repay it; rather, beg for mercy. Before you were saved, it is as if you owed God a debt that you could not pay, not even in a thousand lifetimes. Thus no one can be justified or made right with God by their good works.

We may consider some individuals worse sinners than others, and we certainly consider many people worse sinners than ourselves. There are many vile and violent criminals in our day – there are child molesters, murderers, robbers, perjurers, adulterers, fornicators, and homosexuals. There are also many who affirm false and evil religions – Muslims, Mormons, Buddhists, and Catholics. However, Jesus declares that the evil deeds and beliefs of others do not acquit you of your own sinfulness:

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them – do you

think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?
I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish." (Luke
13:1-5)

Unless you repent and become a true Christian, you will the same fate as the homosexuals and the Buddhists – endless conscious extreme torment in hell. "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31).

Repentance refers to a decisive turning of the mind from sin and toward God. It is a renunciation of your former way of thinking and living, and that you must trust Christ to save you from sin and its consequences. You must say to God, "My debt incurred by sin is too great, and I cannot repay it. I need somebody else to help me, somebody else to pay the price for me. Now I call upon Jesus Christ to save me, confessing that he had died for his elect, and that he rose from the dead for the elect's justification, to be the mediator between God and his chosen ones." If your repentance is true and sincere, then it means that God has chosen you for salvation (2 Thessalonians 2:13), and that he has already started his work in you.

The servant has incurred a debt that he cannot pay, and so "the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt" (Matthew 18:25). The servant begs the master for mercy, and promises to repay all the debt, which as we have seen, is an untruthful and unrealistic statement. Up to this point, the situation seems impossible. But we read in verse 27, "The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go." The solution does not from the servant himself, but from the master, who forgave the debt out of compassion.

The master cancels the debt not because he has to, or that the servant somehow has the right to his compassion. Rather, the master has the right to punish, and the servant has no rights at all. Likewise, God's forgiveness toward us is based on his mercy and compassion instead of obligation. God was never required to send Jesus Christ for die for the elect; he was never required to forgive us of our sins. God does not owe us forgiveness or any of the gifts he gives us. No one has the right in himself to go to heaven or make any demands on God.

Many people speak about God as if he owes us everything that we desire or demand, and so we hear questions such as, "If there is a God, why do so many people suffer poverty, hunger, sickness, and other such things?" If we truly understand the severity of sin, and that we are the ones who owe God, then the question should be, "How in the world can there be so *little* suffering in this world when we owe God so much? How can there be so much forgiveness when there is so much sin?" God does not owe you any gifts or blessings – but even the air you are breathing is his gift.

Why is there so much forgiveness when there is so much sin? The Bible explains, "But where sin increased, grace increased all the more" (Romans 5:20). Such is the magnitude of God's forgiveness and compassion. Such is the perfection of his mercy toward those whom he has chosen to be in Christ.

Now, other people's sins against us are always small and insignificant compared to the sins for which God has forgiven us. Verse 28 says, "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded." A "denarius" was only a day's wages. This servant owes the other one a hundred denarii, and so it was a hundred days' wages. Although it is probably a significant amount of money from the servants' perspective, it is at least possible to repay.

Thus the second servant pleads with the first: "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back'" (v. 29). The second servant who owes the money says exactly the same thing the first servant said to the master, but this time the promise to repay is realistic. But the first servant does not have compassion on his fellow servant: "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt" (v. 30). Here it does not say that the first servant is unable to forgive the second, but that he refuses to forgive the debt.

The parable continues, "When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?'" (v. 31-33). Now, Ephesians 4:32 says, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." Thus God commands us to forgive others in the same way that he has forgiven us. Whereas God was never obligated to forgive any of us, he has imposed the obligation upon us to forgive others.

One excuse that many people use when refusing to forgive another is to say, "I have the right to hold this against him. He has really done me wrong." While the Bible does not deny that others do commit sins against us, it denies us the right to hold their sins against them when they repent, and commands us to have the willingness and compassion to forgive.

The master in this parable does not question whether the second servant owes money to the first, but he condemns the first servant's behavior, in that he who has been forgiven a debt of ten thousand talents refuses to forgive the debt of him who only owes only one hundred denarii. Likewise, God requires that, upon the offender's repentance, we forgive him from the heart (v. 35).

Many people emphasize how forgiving others benefits themselves. Even professing Christians teach forgiveness from this angle. For example, they teach that resentment is detrimental to one's health and spiritual condition, that you should forgive those who have wronged you if for no other reason than to benefit yourself, and that your forgiveness will probably benefit you more than those you will forgive.

However, this teaching and this emphasis are unbiblical. Forgiveness always costs the one who forgives. It costs the master ten thousand talents to forgive the first servant in the parable. God also forgives us at his own expense – his son had to die the death of the cross to secure salvation for us.

The Bible teaches that we must forgive those who have wronged us because of our obedience to God and our compassion for them, so that we forgive for God's glory and for the offenders' sake. We should forgive because we are grateful for God's forgiveness toward us, not because we desire better health and peace of mind. It should not be difficult to have compassion on those who repent, since "God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (Romans 5:5).

We should forgive others because we are not our own. Because God commands us to forgive those who have wronged us when they repent, we have no right to withhold forgiveness when they do repent: "So watch yourselves. 'If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him'" (Luke 17:3). In addition, we must repeatedly forgive the same person if he repents: "If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him" (v. 4).

5. ON WEALTH

Jesus says, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). From the outset, we know that one should never be obsessed with money. However, money is what many people constantly think about, and they evaluate themselves and others based on their wealth.

Of course, people worry about all sorts of things, such as their relationships, their children, and their health. Yet it is true that many of them spend much or even most of their time worrying over financial matters. On the other hand, Jesus says that "a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions," and to think and behave in a way that is contrary to this may be an indication of one's greed. He has much more to say on the subject than this, as the following study of two parables on wealth will show.

Our first parable is taken from Luke 12:16-21:

The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, "What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops." Then he said, "This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'" But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.

In the parables of Jesus, an authority figure is sometimes used to represent God (similar to God's character) or to be a contrast to God (different from God's character). For example, the unrighteous judge in Luke 18 is a contrast to God, and in that passage Jesus is showing that God is eager to answer the cries of his chosen ones, unlike the unrighteous judge, who is reluctant to dispense justice. But in this parable from Luke 12, God appears to speak for himself.

Luke arranges the words of Jesus so that the following appears right after our parable, and makes explicit that the rich man's sin consists of giving his thoughts entirely over to creating and preserving wealth, having removed God out of his plans and actions:

Then Jesus said to his disciples: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more

valuable you are than birds! Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest? Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom." (Luke 12:22-32)

Now, the rich man says, "This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods" (Luke 12:18). Proper financial planning and saving are never forbidden in Scripture, but are rather encouraged (Proverbs 30:25). But this rich man goes beyond simple planning and saving, but he is actively hoarding his wealth with no end in sight and does not put his wealth to good and selfless use. He hoards for himself, with no consideration of God and other people. This man plans for his future, but he does not plan far enough, since he only plans for this life. He says to himself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years." He speaks in terms of days and years, but fails to consider the afterlife.

God responds, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" (v. 20). No matter how shrewd a person seems to be in worldly affairs, if his thinking is unspiritual, he will always be a fool in God's eyes. Scripture says, "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Psalm 111:10), so that one who does not fear God has not even started to be wise. Any person who fears God is superior in wisdom to one who does not fear God. It follows that all Christians are superior in wisdom to all non-Christians.

Proverbs 3:6 says, "In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight." Being rich in itself is not a sin, but this man has left God out of his mind and plans. However, you cannot truly "plan" God out of your life. You ignore him to your own peril. "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God" (Luke 12:21).

As John Purdy writes, "If we hold that true wisdom is to be rich toward God, then work will have a limited place in our lives....We will not make work a means of securing our lives against all possible calamities."⁹ He is not telling us to despise work or to be lazy, but that work should have "a limited place in our lives" – it should not consume all of your time and energy. You should not work to pursue wealth to the extent of damaging your family relationships and spiritual development. According to Christ, to do otherwise would be regarded as foolish in God's eyes.

⁹ John Purdy, *Parables at Work*.

Our next parable on wealth is found in Luke 16:1-13:

Jesus told his disciples: "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.' The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg – I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.' So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 'Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied. The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.' Then he asked the second, 'And how much do you owe?' 'A thousand bushels of wheat,' he replied. He told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred.'" (v. 1-7)

A rich man discovers that his manager was "wasting his possessions," and decides to dismiss him. But before he leaves, this manager summons all the people who owe the master, and reduces their debts to obtain their favor. He reasons that because he does this, "when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses." That is, he believes that these people will help him in return.

Jesus continues:

The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money. (v. 8-13)

Verse 8 says, "For the people of this world are more shrewd *in dealing with their own kind* than are the people of the light." Jesus is saying that unbelievers are often wiser than believers with their money relative to their own way of living. He is not telling Christians to imitate the manager's dishonesty, but he is making the point that unbelievers are often wise in their use of wealth given their worldly priorities, but that Christians are often

foolish in their use of wealth given their spiritual priorities. To put it another way, unbelievers are often better at being unbelievers than Christians are at being Christians.

Given our spiritual priorities, Christians ought to know what to do with their wealth. For example, we should invest our money in people: "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves" (v. 9). The manager in this parable knows how to use money to create relationships with others. Likewise, when we give our money to promote biblical doctrine and evangelism, we are properly using "worldly wealth," as opposed to using all of it in things that contribute to our mere amusement and comfort.

We may carry out the above by regularly giving money to churches and ministries, and if you never give money to churches and ministries, there may be something seriously wrong with your spiritual life. However, something simple like giving a Bible to a new convert is also consistent with the above principle. Another example would be to purchase quality Christian books for other believers. By doing these things, you will be investing in the most important aspect of other people's lives, using your "worldly wealth" in a way that creates an otherworldly impact. This is without doubt a wise use of money.

The wisest use of wealth will always touch that which is spiritual. While the dishonest manager in the parable plans for his temporal welfare, Jesus says to invest in things that are spiritual. Use your wealth to benefit others in spiritual ways, and "you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings." In other words, you will have friends when you get to heaven. The benefits that they will receive will endure beyond this life into the next, and you will be rewarded for your contribution. A truly wise person will use his wealth to create an impact that lasts beyond this life.

Jesus concludes the parable by saying:

Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money. (Luke 16:10-13)

No matter how much money passes through your hands in this life, it is "little" compared to the riches that you may have in the afterlife; however, "he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much," so "if you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous wealth, who will entrust the true riches to you?" (v. 11). Money is not true wealth, but God has true riches reserved for you in heaven. But why should he entrust you with true riches if you are not faithful with earthly wealth?

These two parables remind us to examine our priorities in our thoughts and actions. If you regularly give to churches and ministries, but if you constantly think about how you may obtain more wealth more than how you may become a better Christian, you are still being foolish. Anything other than God that binds the mind is an idol, and God's hold on your mind is characterized by scriptural thoughts.

God is not against us having money, and indeed he prospers people as he wills, but he wants us to be preoccupied with only the things of God:

Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. (Luke 12:27-32)

Remember what Jesus says: "The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful" (Matthew 13:22). Many professing Christians are spiritually barren because they are obsessed with worldly wealth. If you are one of these people, now is the time to repent and change.

6. ON EXCLUSIVISM

Christianity affirms the absolute exclusivity of salvation, meaning that there is only one way to be saved, and everyone who does not come through this way is excluded. The way to God and heaven is not a wide path but a narrow one. In fact, it is so narrow that there is only one way to be saved, and anyone who does not travel on this path is heading toward damnation, or endless conscious torment in hell.

The Bible has no respect for all non-Christian religions – it denounces all of them as false, having been inspired by demons and invented by men. This is evident in various sections of the Bible, such as the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:3), the confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:20-46), and the writings of the apostle Paul (Romans 1:18-32). Whereas all Christians will be taken to heaven, all non-Christians will suffer endless conscious torment in hell.

As Peter declares in Acts 4:8-12:

Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by *the name of Jesus Christ* of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is "the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone." *Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.*

Now we turn to John 10:1-10, which reads as follows:

"I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice." Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them. Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find

pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."

There were two kinds of sheepfolds. In the villages and towns, there were communal sheepfolds where all the village flocks were sheltered when they returned home at night. These folds were protected by a strong gate to which only the gatekeeper held the key. Verse 3 says, "The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out."

There was a second kind of sheepfold. During the warmer seasons, a shepherd may take the sheep out to the hills and may not return at night. At such times, the sheep would be gathered into an open space with a wall surrounding it. Each of these sheepfolds had an opening through which the sheep may go in and come out. There was no physical gate or door. At night, the shepherd would lie down across the opening, and no sheep could go in or come out except over his body. Thus the shepherd was literally the gate. In verses 7-9, Jesus states, "I am the gate for the sheep," and "whoever enters through me will be saved." Corresponding to this, he says in John 14:6, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Thus Jesus excludes all other options for salvation. There is no "way" to God apart from Jesus, and all the other alleged paths to salvation are false and lead to damnation. Those who fail to embrace Jesus Christ have rejected salvation, and those who follow others in the hope for salvation are not God's sheep. They do not belong to God, and they will not be saved. On the other hand, Jesus says in John 10:14, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me." If you belong to God, then you will know Jesus Christ and follow him as your shepherd. Some people ask, "Are there not many ways to God?" God's answer is, "NO!" There is only one way to God and salvation.

Jesus is not only the gate of the sheepfold, but he also calls himself the "good shepherd." He says in John 10:11, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." And in verse 14, he says, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me."

Now, Jesus says in verse 9, "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will *come in and go out*, and find pasture." To the Hebrews, the ability to go in and come out without troubles implies peace and security in life. We find this idea several times in the Old Testament. For example, Deuteronomy 28:1-2, 6 says, "If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God....You will be *blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out*."

Then, Numbers 27:15-18 says, "Moses said to the LORD, 'May the LORD, the God of the spirits of all mankind, appoint a man over this community to *go out and come in* before them, one who will *lead them out and bring them in*, so the LORD's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd.' So the LORD said to Moses, 'Take Joshua son of

Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay your hand on him." Moses is about to pass away, and he asks God for a successor. In effect, he prays, "Grant Israel a new leader, who will give them peace, security, structure, order, and victory." He is asking for a leader who would "go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in."

Then, we turn to Psalm 121, for our final illustration: "The LORD will keep you from all harm – he will watch over your life; the LORD will *watch over your coming and going* both now and forevermore" (v. 7-8). If God's protection is you, you will be able to "come in and go out" in peace, without encountering problems or being harassed.

As Christians, Jesus is our gate and our shepherd, so that we may "come in and go out, and find pasture" (v. 9). He brings us not only salvation from sin, but also peace, stability, security, and power: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). Although many Christians have received salvation by faith in Jesus Christ, they still do not have peace. They need to understand that Jesus is both the gate to our salvation and the shepherd of the flock. We can trust him, be led by him, and be at rest in him.

He says in Matthew 11:29-30, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Many Christians do not have rest; rather, they are quite troubled in their souls. They constantly bear the burden of fear and guilt. They need to see Jesus as their good shepherd. As Peter says in 1 Peter 2:25, "For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls."

Although he is the good shepherd, Jesus has also chosen certain Christians to watch over his flock. Ministers are as shepherds watching over the sheep that belong to Jesus Christ. Thus Jesus is the "Chief Shepherd" (1 Peter 5:4), and Christian ministers serve under him to watch over his people.

In Acts 20:28-32, Paul says the following:

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

Paul speaks of the Christians as sheep, and the ministers as "overseers" and "shepherds." But he also mentions "savage wolves," saying, "I know that after I leave, savage wolves

will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and *distort the truth* in order to draw away disciples after them." In other words, even some professing Christians would introduce false doctrines into the church. Paul prescribes the solution: "Now I commit you to God and to the *word of his grace*, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified." The minister's responsibility is to lead God's people, and his priority is to teach them the word of God and protect them from false doctrines. Ministers must understand that their primary duty is to feed the sheep with sound doctrinal preaching.

One main objective of the ministry is to help Christians reach maturity, so that they will no longer be as "infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching" (Ephesians 4:14). Ministers are to "preach the word" at all times despite the protests of those who have "itching ears," and who only wish to hear things that "suit their own desires" (2 Timothy 4:2-3). God says that the "shepherds after my own heart" are those who will "lead you with knowledge and understanding" (Jeremiah 3:15). There is no such thing as a competent Christian leader who does not emphasize doctrine.

Peter the apostle writes:

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. (1 Peter 5:1-4)

Our next passage on the exclusivity of salvation comes from Matthew 7:13-14. Jesus says, "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." Here the two gates and the two roads represent the ways to salvation and destruction. The wide gate and the wide road lead to destruction, but the narrow gate and the narrow road lead to life.

Those who affirm the biblical doctrine of exclusivism are often accused of being narrow-minded. However, Jesus himself is extremely narrow-minded and close-minded when it comes to salvation. He affirms that there is only one way to salvation, and that the matter is not subject to debate or revision.

Our society extols open-mindedness as a virtue, but all it means is that the person has no claim to knowledge – that is, it is an admission of ignorance. Indeed, it seems that we should be open-minded while we are ignorant and uncertain. But once we have settled upon the truth, it would be foolish to remain open-minded about the matter. I am not

open-minded about whether $2 + 2 = 4$. I am not open-minded about whether I have two hands and two feet. I am not trying to find out the truth about these things – I already know the truth about these things. Accordingly, no Christian should be open-minded about whether Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation – we already know that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation. Open-mindedness is often nothing more than intellectual ignorance and moral cowardice.

1 Timothy 3:15 says that "the church of the living God" is the "pillar and foundation of the truth." Whereas many people consider the search for truth a worthy lifetime goal, Christians already know the truth. In this sense, we are not seekers of the truth, but since we have already found the truth – Jesus says, "Your word is truth" (John 17:17) – we are now students and defenders of the truth. Salvation is exclusive – there is only one way to be saved. But the way to destruction is wide open. When it comes to salvation, being open-minded to anything other than the true biblical faith is foolish and dangerous.

Many people claim that enlightenment leads to open-mindedness – the more enlightened you are, the more open-minded you should be. But they are wrong. True enlightenment will inevitably lead to narrow-mindedness. The closer you are to the truth, the more options you will have eliminated. When it comes to salvation, when you have come to the truth, you will have excluded every false way to salvation, and Jesus Christ is the only one who remains.

Of course, the term "narrow-minded" is often used in a derogatory manner, but we may turn it around and use it in a positive sense. Whereas a "narrow-mindedness" resulting from precise knowledge is a sign of wisdom, an uncritical open-mindedness is the mark of a fool. Open-mindedness is a mask behind which intellectual midgets hide. To say that a person is completely open-minded also means that he does not know anything. He has no information on the subject that will enable him to exclude options that are obviously false.

At any rate, why do we need more than one way to salvation? May we really say to God, "I want to be saved and be with you in heaven forever – but only on my terms!" Many people insist on other ways to salvation when God has provided only one. With such an attitude, is it any wonder that they will be condemned to endless extreme conscious torment in hell?

7. ON SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS

Luke seems to favor the topic of self-righteousness, since a number of passages in his Gospel has to do with how Jesus challenged those who had an unjustified security in their own righteousness. For example, Luke 13:1-5 says:

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them – do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

Do you think that in yourself you are better than the murderers, rapists, liars, adulterers, and homosexuals? These people will indeed be condemned to endless suffering in hell, but if you do not repent, you too will perish like them.

Our first parable comes from Luke 18:9-14, and reads as follows:

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18:9-14)

In many circles, it is popular to say that we should not "judge" people. This idea has been so distorted and carried to such extreme that it has crippled the moral discernment and authority of the church. Although Scripture speaks against unbiblical and hypocritical judgment, it does not forbid but rather commands us to make moral judgments of people based on the precepts revealed to us in Scripture: "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). Therefore, making accurate evaluations of others based on biblical principles should not be confused as a mark of self-righteousness. In fact, Jesus teaches us to, "Stop judging by mere appearances, and make

a right judgment" (John 7:24). Our Lord forbids us to make false judgments, and commands us to make right judgments.

Thus a person who "judges" people is not necessarily being self-righteous; rather, Jesus was speaking against those who were "confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else" (v. 9). Since Scripture states that all men are totally depraved before regeneration, self-righteous people are therefore self-deceived. They fail to see that they are in the same wretched condition as those whom they despise, and that they are just as much in need of God's sovereign grace and mercy.

Another translation says that these people "*trusted in themselves* that they were righteous" (NASB), and that was their problem. They see no need for a "foreign" righteousness to make them acceptable to God. Although the Bible says, "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away" (Isaiah 64:6), and that, "there is no one who does good, not even one" (Romans 3:12), self-righteous people are blind to their own sinfulness. The truth is that we are not righteous in ourselves, and all of us are in need of salvation by an external power. Thus a self-righteous man does not only look down on others, but he does so without good reason. That is, one is deceived who depends on his own righteousness as his basis for considering himself superior to another.

Verses 11-12 say, "The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'" Have you ever thanked God that you are not like other people? Here, the Pharisee mentions, "robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even...this tax collector." He is saying to God, "I thank you that I am not unrighteous like other people. I am not an adulterer, nor am I a murderer." Then, he points to a specific example, a tax collector, and says, "I thank God that I am not like him."

Now, if you are depending on the merits of Christ as the basis of your claim to being righteous before God, then you are a Christian, and of course you should be grateful that you are not one of the non-Christians. However, this is not the same as claiming that you are more righteous than others in yourself, as the Pharisee is doing in our passage. If your confidence before God is based on your own positive evaluation of yourself, then you are deceived, and you need to know that, "Unless you repent, you too will all perish" (Luke 13:3). Even one who is considered relatively righteous by men, but on whom God has not imputed the righteousness of Christ, will ultimately suffer the same fate as the obviously unrighteous, such as robbers, adulterers, and murderers.

The Pharisee fails to grasp this point. He says, "I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get" (v. 12). A self-righteous person depends on good works like fasting and tithing to justify himself before God, but these are insufficient. Jesus explains, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (v. 14). A self-righteous person exalts himself. He does not wait for the approval of God, but he lifts up himself before God and others.

Whenever he comes into contact with people, he immediately tries to bring out all his credentials and mentions all the good deeds that he has done. But Jesus teaches us to do otherwise:

So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (Matthew 6:2-4)

On the other hand, Jesus says concerning the tax collector, "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God" (v. 14). This is a surprising ending, especially for the first century Jewish hearers. The tax collector is justified, rather than the Pharisee who seems to have performed numerous good deeds. What is the difference between them? Verse 13 says, "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'" He faces the truth about himself. He knows exactly what he is – a sinner in need of God's mercy.

If you want to attain true righteousness, then you need to face the truth about yourself. The tax collector not only faces the truth about himself, but he also understands the only solution to his sin. He confessed that he is a sinner, and then he throws himself on God's sovereign grace: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." The only antidote to sin is God's mercy, and not moral reformation based on our own will and effort.

The debt of sin is too great for us to pay. The tax collector has this valuable insight and acts accordingly. Rather than denying that his debt or promising to pay it (which he cannot do), he pleads for mercy, of which God has plenty: "For thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee" (Psalm 86:5, KJV). When coming to God, we must first see our true condition, and then depend on his mercy alone. There is no other way. In fact, without God first showing us mercy and illuminating our minds, we will not acknowledge even our own sinfulness. Thus from beginning to end, salvation comes from God alone, who shows mercy to whomever he wills.

Jesus concludes the parable with the admonition, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:14). This leads us to our next parable, which comes from Luke 14:7-11:

When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: "When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who

invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this man your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Jesus noticed that some people were picking out the places of honor for themselves. They did this because they thought highly of themselves or wanted to exalt themselves. To counter this type of behavior Jesus teaches that true honor is given and not taken. This is especially true in the kingdom of God. You must remain humble and wait for God to promote you. Instead of picking the places of honor for yourself, choose the lowest place. Rather having to go through the embarrassment of having the honor that you have inappropriately assumed taken away from you, you should take a low position for yourself, and let another promote you instead.

Christians need to learn this lesson. We expect selfishness and self-exaltation from the world, but the same attitudes and behaviors that characterize unbelievers pervade many congregations. Even ministers "network" with others not to provide greater service to their people or to promote the glory of God, but to multiply "connections" that would bring them fame and financial gain. Some preachers call themselves "apostles" and seek to exercise authority of many churches, but they barely know enough of the Bible to teach children's class.

Jesus says in Matthew 20:25-28, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Church leaders are indeed "first" in the sense that God has given them authority over his people. But this is so that they may promote his cause and serve his flock, and not to increase their own fleshly comfort by demanding others to serve them. Many people do not live up to the place of honor that they would like to have, or have already claimed for themselves. For example, some may want to be respected as a preacher or theologian among Christians, but they do not faithfully study and teach the words of Scripture.

Even Jesus Christ did not seek honor for himself, but he sought to do the will of God so as to gain the honor that comes from his Father. He says in John 5:44, "How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?" And in John 8:54, he says, "If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me." True honor comes from God and not men.

Verse 11 of our passage says, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." This is the general principle: "He who humbles

himself will be exalted." Several times the KJV uses the word, "vainglory," which means empty honor. Vainglory is indeed a sort of honor, but it is "empty" and without true meaning. Some people would do anything to get some recognition, but from who does the recognition come?

The apostle Paul says in Philippians 2:3, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves." The KJV renders "vain conceit" as "vainglory," or empty honor. Let us read it this way: "Do nothing out of selfishness, or for empty honor, but with a humble attitude consider others as better than yourselves." This is difficult for some people to do – to lift up others, and to put down themselves.

There is a false humility, where one's pride is actually hidden in the superficial way that he puts himself down. However, true humility does not deny the facts – that is, you may admit to possessing certain talents (and even those are the gifts of God), but you are simply not obnoxious about them, always flaunting them in front of others, and desiring to receive recognition and praise from them. Do not try to get the spotlight all the time.

The Bible says, "No one from the east or the west or from the desert can exalt a man. But it is God who judges: He brings one down, he exalts another" (Psalm 75:6-7). Wait for God to promote you. God will put you in the right place at the right time. God will bring you together with the right people. He will fulfill his plan for your life. Trusting God for our promotion may demand patience. Most of us would like to be promoted sooner than when it actually happens. But we must understand that God will never deceive us, and he will fulfill his promises and plans for our lives.

Even more important than how God honors us is whether we are honoring God. We should honor him in our thoughts and actions. God says in 1 Samuel 2:30, "Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained." Do we honor him in our daily life? Do we give him thanks, or do we constantly complain against him? Do we defend his honor against the blasphemies of non-Christians? Are we zealous for his honor? Do we think good thoughts about him? Psalm 19:14 says, "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer."

The self-righteous person honors himself, but in the end he receives only empty honor from men. On the other hand, true honor only comes through God's sovereign approval of a biblical lifestyle. We are not to honor ourselves, but to focus our efforts on honoring God, and God will honor us at the proper time: "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time" (1 Peter 5:6). Self-righteousness is at least partly a result of spiritual blindness – the inability to see one's wretchedness. May God open our eyes to see our true condition, so that we may despair of our own efforts and depend on his mercy alone.

8. ON MINISTRY

Every Christian is called to work for God, but many people hold to very wrong beliefs related to this topic. The way many professing Christians think today, it is as if they believe that somehow God is our servant and they are his masters, and that the service we offer to God is a favor to him that demands to be rewarded. This chapter corrects this unbiblical view of man and ministry, and reminds us of God's mastery and ownership over us. God owes us nothing; rather, any service that we offer him is owed to him in the first place, and it is only because of his sovereign grace that we will be rewarded for it.

Our first parable comes from Matthew 25:14-30:

Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. "Master," he said, "you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more."

His master replied, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"

The man with the two talents also came. "Master," he said, "you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more."

His master replied, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"

Then the man who had received the one talent came. "Master," he said, "I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you."

His master replied, "You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.

"Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Some ministers teach that each believer has been given the same measure of faith and grace. According to them, although we may have been given different kinds of spiritual gifts and ministries, we have been given the same amount of faith and grace. They even apply this to Christian ministers, so that not even those especially called to the work of ministry are given more grace than those who are not called this way. According to them, although some Christians have taken advantage of the means of grace by which they mature and grow quicker than others, one Christian does not begin with more spiritual power than another.

However, this teaching is unbiblical. It is not true that God gives everyone the same amount of faith and grace, or spiritual power. Jesus says that in "the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 25:1), one is given five talents, another is given two, and another is given only one (v. 15).

Paul writes, "We have different gifts, *according* to the grace given us" (Romans 12:6). This indicates that the grace given to us determines our gifts, and the grace given to us differ. The grace given to an apostle differ from the grace given to a prophet, and the grace given to a theologian differ from the grace given to an evangelist. He continues, "If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it *in proportion* to his faith" (Romans 12:6). This indicates that spiritual gifts differ not only in kind, but also in strength depending on the measure of a person's faith. Thus what kind of spiritual gifts you have depends on the specific grace that God has given to you, and you may exercise these gifts to the extent of your level of faith. However, you do not decide how much faith you have, since faith is not something that you manufacture, but it is a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8). Our faith for ministry is a faith that comes through Christ (Acts 3:16).

The NIV says, "*the* measure of faith," and this gives some people the idea that God gives everyone the same amount of faith at the beginning, and that it is up to us to develop it. However, the definite article ("the") is absent from the Greek text. The verse does not refer to a set measure of faith, but it says, "the measure of faith *God has given you*." The NASB correctly translates, "as God has allotted to each *a measure* of faith." That is, God gives each Christian a measure of faith, and rather than saying that each has been given

the same measure, this verse implies that each has been given a specific and different measure of faith as determined by God.

Everett F. Harrison writes as follow:

Is there some gauge that will enable a person to estimate his position with respect to spiritual gifts? Paul answers in the affirmative, pointing to "the measure of faith"...Godet understands "measure" in the sense of degree. "This gift, the measure of the action to which we are called, is the divine limit which the Christian's renewed mind should discern, and by which he should regulate his aspirations in regard to the part he has to play in the church"...faith, as used in this passage...[is] faith in the sense of grasping the nature of one's spiritual gift and having confidence to exercise it rightly.¹⁰

Some people think that it would be unjust for God to give people different measures of faith and grace. But this kind of thinking is dangerous and foolish. None of us deserves even one "talent," and now are we complaining that some have been given more? As a character in another parable says, "Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (Matthew 20:15). Paul writes, "God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be" (1 Corinthians 12:18). Our place in the church has been determined by the sovereign will of God.

In any case, it is not correct to assume that everyone must be given the same amount of faith and grace, since God has called Christians to perform tasks of different levels of magnitude and difficulty. In fact, one may argue that it would be unfair to give the one who is called to accomplish a difficult task the same measure of faith and grace as one who is called to fulfill a relatively small responsibility. For example, one who is called to an international television and radio ministry needs much more faith and grace than a Christian who lives what seems to be an uneventful life. At least in the area of ministry, we cannot ignore the fact that some Christians have been given more faith and grace than others.

Ministers do not need to deny this biblical teaching to encourage believers to serve in the church or preach the gospel. Instead of telling them that everyone has been given the same amount of faith and grace, we only need to remind them that each has been given *some* measure of faith and grace, and that they have the obligation to exercise their spiritual gifts to the level of their faith and grace, and thus to render the proper service to God.

In addition, we affirm that one may grow in faith and grace. A Christian is not limited to the amount of faith and grace that he has been initially given. Paul writes, "We ought

¹⁰ *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 10; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976; p. 129.

always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing" (2 Thessalonians 1:3). On the other hand, even one who has been given an abundance of spiritual gifts may neglect them, and thus we are commanded to "fan into flame the gift of God" (2 Timothy 1:6), so that our ministries may operate as God intends.

Our parable says in Matthew 25:16, "The man who had received the five talents went *at once* and *put his money to work* and gained five more." He immediately begins to use what his master has given to him. Likewise, God demands that we use our spiritual gifts to interact with the world, edify the church, and promote his cause. As 1 Peter 4:10-11 says:

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

We are to use our spiritual gifts to "serve others," to the end that "in all things God may be praised."

You are to use the gifts that God has given you. If you have been given a hammer, do not try to saw wood with it, but put your hammer to proper use by hammering in a nail instead. As you "put your money (spiritual gifts) to work," you will be properly serving others, and you will be bringing glory of God.

As we use our gifts to interact with the world, our relationship with it will be increasingly defined by our gifts. Since God is the one who decides what gifts we have, he is the one who determines what role we will have in this world, and our relationship with this world is correctly defined only as we use the gifts that he has given us.

If God has given you the gift to teach, and you are faithfully exercising this gift, you will be correctly recognized as a teacher. If you stand up behind the pulpit to preach every week, people will not mistake you as an accountant or a politician! It is the will of God for you to be recognized and defined by the gifts that he has given you. God has defined your place in the church, and has given you the corresponding gifts. Others simply recognize what God has already decided.

However, if you pretend to function in a ministry office that God has not given to you, you will be falsely defined in this world. Only when you function according to the way that God has designed you will you be correctly serving others, bringing glory to God, and correctly defined both in the world and in the church. And as you use the spiritual gifts that God has given you, they will increase in scope and in strength: "The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with the two talents gained two more" (v. 16-17).

What we do with our spiritual gifts will have long-lasting ramifications:

After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. "Master," he said, "you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more." His master replied, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" (Matthew 25:19-21)

Paul writes, "For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance" (1 Timothy 4:8-9). We should always focus our attention on spiritual things, since they affect both our present life and the life to come. Thus the proper use of our spiritual gifts is no small matter.

The parable teaches that fear and laziness can prevent one from using his gifts to interact with the world. Verse 18 says, "But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money." Later, he explains, "I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you" (v. 25).

Although he claims that he has lost nothing, his master rebukes him: "You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents."

The master observes, "You should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest." But the fearful servant fails to do even that, and thus the master discerns another reason for the servant's uselessness, that he is a lazy servant. Likewise, God disapproves of those who hide their gifts. His grace is not cheap or common, but of high quality and value. Therefore, if God has entrusted to you something as priceless as his faith and grace, it would indeed be "wicked" to hide them (v. 26).

In this parable, it is the one with the fewest talents that fails to perform. It is often the same in our churches. Those who are given multiple spiritual gifts are often functional within the church, and their abilities overflow and become obvious to all. But those who have fewer gifts often retreat into passivity, when they have the same duty to God and other Christians build up the church by using their spiritual gifts. However, having fewer spiritual gifts is not to blame, since this parable exposes fear and laziness as the reasons for their lack of initiative.

Our second passage comes from Luke 17:7-10, which reads as follows:

Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, "Come along now and sit down to eat"? Would he not rather say, "Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink"? Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty." (Luke 17:7-10)

The master does not owe the servant any kindness or gratitude just because the servant has performed his duties. The master is not obligated to offer any special commendation or even a word of thanks to a servant who has done what he is supposed to do. In addition, even after a whole day's work, the servant has no right to demand any rest or comfort, but he is obligated to continue serving his master.

This strongly contradicts the thinking of many professing Christians. They think that because they have served God in their praying, preaching, giving, and other activities, now God owes them his favor and gratitude. In a human relationship, it is right for one to return the favor when he has received assistance from his friend. It is proper to show gratitude to one who has treated you with kindness. We feel obligated to help those who have helped us.

Some people have often pulled God down to our level in their thinking. They assume that God owes them after they have rendered him service. However, they have forgotten that he never *owes* us – he *owns* us! They have so focused on a distorted view of their sonship in Christ that they have ignored biblical passages that refer to us as the slaves of God, and passages declaring his total ownership over us: "You are not your own; you were bought at a price" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

Some professing Christians may find it unusual when our relationship with God is illustrated by that of a master and slave relationship, although this is indeed what Scripture teaches. Their discomfort with the idea come from a "Christian" culture in which many ministers and believers falsely romanticize our relationship with God into one characterized by sentimental feelings and experiences. It is true that we as Christians are the children of God, but those passages that view us as slaves of Christ carry just as much divine authority as those describing our sonship. Christians need to bring back a consciousness of their being the slaves of God. Any act of kindness from God is solely due to his mercy offered through the covenant we have with him in Christ, and never as an obligatory payment for our service or faithfulness.

A consciousness of our being the slaves of Christ humbles us, but it does not mean that we go through life with our heads down – depressed and afraid. That would be a false picture of a life of humility and service. Instead, person who understands that he is a slave of God becomes fearless in life, because he knows that he does not belong to himself. His confidence rests on his master, since he has no confidence in himself. If you

can truly see yourself as a slave of God, you will be able to overcome your flesh, your emotions, and any disobedience and rebellion in your heart. Fear melts away since self-preservation is no longer a priority. We cease to fear for our own safety or welfare, since we know that we do not belong to ourselves.

As much as we have preached about human depravity and sovereign grace, many professing Christians still depend on their good works when they approach God. Most of the time their good works do not amount to much anyway. But no matter how much genuine good deeds you have done, you have done only that which you ought to have done. If you are depending on what you have done for God when expecting him to answer your prayer, you do not stand a chance. God will hear your prayer because of his mercy, kindness, and his faithfulness to the promises given to you through Jesus Christ. On no other basis can you expect anything from God.

Another passage that refers to a master and slave relationship comes from Luke 12:35-38:

Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, like men waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. I tell you the truth, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the second or third watch of the night.

The master is said to serve his slaves in this passage,¹¹ but this does not contradict what we have read from Luke 17.

The parable in Luke 17 shows that a master is not required to show kindness to the slave, and the slave has no claim on the master's gratitude. Jesus applies this to his disciples in verse 10: "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'" The parable tells us that the master has the right to make continuous demand on the slave, such as the Lord's command that we repeatedly forgive others (v. 3-4), and it also tells us what our attitude and behavior as slaves should be toward God.

On the other hand, Luke 12:37 tells us that God's kindness is beyond that of an ordinary human master, and that in fact he rewards and "serves" those who are faithful to him. Since our tendency is to abuse the kindness of God, we must remind ourselves not to take him for granted because of our knowledge of his great mercy. We should still see ourselves as "unworthy servants," as Jesus teaches. God's kindness is such that when he finds you in a posture of humility, he will "lift you up in due time" (1 Peter 5:6), but this is not something that we do for ourselves, and especially not in our relationship with God. Foolish is the one who lifts himself up before God and makes demands of him!

¹¹ The word translated "servant" here is more correctly translated "slave."

Thus Luke 17:10 tells you what your attitude should be, and Luke 12:37 tells you what God's attitude will be – that he will show you mercy, although it is not required of him as your master.

God would be entirely righteous if he were to treat us like slaves, since we are indeed his slaves. But the Bible says that he treats us as sons, having adopted us in Christ. Any amount of work that slaves do can be taken for granted and not rewarded, but God rewards us as if we are more than slaves. Among other things, we must always think of ourselves as the slaves of God, so that we do not take God for granted, and so we will remember that anything good that God does for us is not out of obligation or debt, but his sovereign kindness.

For the purpose of maintaining this attitude of humility, we should often consider the following biblical passages:

Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm. He said: "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone – while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?" (Job 38:1-7)

The LORD said to Job: "Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!" Then Job answered the LORD: "I am unworthy – how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer – twice, but I will say no more." Then the LORD spoke to Job out of the storm: "Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself? Do you have an arm like God's, and can your voice thunder like his?" (Job 40:1-9)

Many professing Christians complain when they are displeased with their lives, and they often question God's justice and his ways. But God says, "Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me *to justify yourself*?" Job says, "I put my hand over my mouth." This is what most people need to do at church. They neglect biblical and theological studies, but then they expect to speak at church gatherings, and demand other people to respect their stupid and unbiblical opinions. But the Bible says: "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong. Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few" (Ecclesiastes 5:1-2).

Then Job replied to the LORD: "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. [You asked,] 'Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?' Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. [You said,] 'Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.' My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:1-6)

Those who do not fear God have not "seen" him. They remain in constant defiance against God, calling their arrogance toward him "faith." They do not know what he is truly like, nor the extent of his power and his holiness. But those who know God humble themselves in repentance, and tremble at his word.

But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath – prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory – even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? (Romans 9:20-24)

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. (Romans 12:3)

But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. (James 4:6-7)

Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained. (1 Samuel 2:30)

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. (Luke 14:11)

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise. (Psalm 111:10)

If the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, then those who challenge, question, and demand from God are fools; yet, how many who call themselves Christians do precisely these things? How often do you do these things? How many professing Christians in fact show no fear of God, but rather dare to challenge and disobey him as if we are on the same level with him? Scripture calls us to listen and understand that a slave who disrespects his master will be put down, but a slave who understands his place will be shown mercy.

Are those of us who claim to be Christians, and who claim to have the Spirit of God within us, still so dull that we require Job's experience to learn his lesson? But Jesus says, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:31). We do not need Job's experience, but all we need to do is to believe what the Scripture says about God and about us. Thus may we learn to humble ourselves so that we will not be put down, but rather be lifted up and honored by God.