



Catalog No. 925

Luke 10:25-37

First Message

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## WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

*SERIES: PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM*

When my wife and I decided to remodel our home a few years ago, we called a good friend who is a building contractor to ask for his suggestions. I had a fairly good idea of what I wanted done, but my friend's remodeling concepts went way beyond anything I envisioned. I could never have imagined the things he came up with. Much to my wife's chagrin, we finally settled on my original, limited plan.

Have you noticed that God continually surprises us by expanding our limited concepts of who he is, demolishing our theological grids in the process? We go to him with some limited concept, but then he "blows out the walls," so to speak. Jesus was a master at this. Whenever he was asked a question, his response invariably stretched the mind of his questioner. This was particularly evident in the parables, as we will see today in the first of a series of messages in the parables of Jesus, from the gospel of Luke.

We live in a tangible, visible world. Things have shape, color, dimension. As Christians, we face a daunting challenge. We are aware that we are surrounded by invisible realities, yet it is difficult to discern them because we are constantly bombarded by the visible and the tangible. We need to learn to "see" with the eyes of our hearts the invisible dimensions of life, and then begin living on this basis, while yet continuing to live in the physical world. How can we accomplish this? In the Scriptures, we find the answer to our dilemma. In particular, the words of Jesus in the parables will help us enter into the realm of the invisible spiritual realities.

The gospel of Luke devotes a considerable section of text, 9:51–19:28, to the parables of Jesus. Luke's gospel breaks down roughly into three sections: chapters 1–9 deal with Jesus' ministry in Galilee; chapters 9–19 deal with the time he spent in Samaria with the disciples while on his way to Jerusalem; and chapters 19–24 deal with events in Jerusalem, culminating in his crucifixion and resurrection.

It is important to note this three-part outline of the gospel of Luke, for two reasons.<sup>1</sup> The first has to do with language. Jesus used three different kinds of speech, or language, a style for each location. The first, which he used in the three years of his ministry in Galilee when he taught his disciples, is called *didache*. This aspect of his ministry concluded in Caesarea Philippi, around the time when Peter declared that Jesus was the Christ. Today, this kind of teaching comes in response to the truth of God at work among us—how things are, how they work, in other words. Its language shapes our minds and heightens our awareness, instructing us in basic spiritual things.

*Kerygma*, or proclamation, was the second form of speech used by Jesus. This was the kind of speech he utilized during the events that occurred in Jerusalem, covering a period of about one week. *Kerygma* is a response to an event or action. Journalism is a form of kerygmatic speech. The *kerygma*, therefore, is the proclamation of the heart of the gospel, a proclamation that leads to conversion and repentance.

The third form of speech was used by Jesus during the three months or so he and his disciples spent in Samaria while they were on their way to Jerusalem, he spoke in parables. Eugene Peterson calls the language of the parables *paraklesis* speech. It is the language of the Holy Spirit, a language that cultivates awareness without giving direction. It is urgent, yet does not seem hurried. It is intense, but not overbearing. In our modern world, most of us are familiar with teaching and proclamation, but we have lost the ability, the thoughtfulness to speak the language of the Holy Spirit.

The parables are rooted in context, in the soil of the Scripture, but they are not conspicuous. The language that is employed forces one to go much deeper than mere surface conversation. Sometimes people will not listen to direct speech, like teaching or proclamation, but the parables have the capacity to enter through the side door of their minds, as it were. To borrow a phrase from Emily Dickinson, parables "tell it slant." Parables do not try to force their way through the front door; they come in from the side, catching us off guard. Jesus wonderfully demonstrated how the language of the Holy Spirit can penetrate the mind because the parables "tell it slant." The parables, therefore, will be extremely helpful in this area because they illustrate this way of speaking.

Besides the three types of speech represented in these three areas of our Lord's ministry, there are three places where ministry and learning occur. Galilee corresponds to home. It is familiar, comfortable, safe. Jerusalem, on the other hand, corresponds to the place of crisis—the final destination, the location for the crucifixion, the event for which Jesus came. Samaria was in-between. It wasn't home, so it wasn't comfortable, but neither was it the final destination. Samaria corresponds to a time of wandering, where things aren't clear and where we don't receive quick-fix instruction. There the disciples were trained to learn this way of relating, trained in the language of the Holy Spirit, trained in the language of prayer. Samaria was where they received spiritual direction. God wanted to teach them to simply "be," to rest and allow the life of Christ and the teaching of Christ to sink deep into their minds.

The parables of Jesus will help us recover a lost language because they teach us about being in Samaria, the in-between place. At some point in our lives all of us will find ourselves here. We are not at home, but neither have we reached our destination. We want hard answers, but there are none obvious. When we ask questions, Jesus responds by telling us stories. This time is as important for us as it was for the disciples. As we study the parables, therefore, we need to try and envision ourselves walking with Jesus and the disciples in Samaria. We are being trained; we are learning the language of the Holy Spirit.

The first parable we will look at is the well known story of the Good Samaritan. The biblical principles in this story are quite obvious, but what the parable asks us to do is extremely radical. The context is one of excitement and success. Jesus had sent out the 72

disciples to minister, and they had returned with success stories of healings and casting out demons. But now comes a warning. Jesus admonishes them and us: do not celebrate for what we do, but for what we are.

Luke 10:25:

And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" And He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?" And he answered and said, "You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself." And He said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live." But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied and said, "A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho; and he fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went off leaving him half dead. And by chance a certain priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, and came to him, and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return, I will repay you.' Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?" And he said, "The one who showed mercy toward him." And Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same." (Luke 10:25-37 NASB)

This parable was provoked by the question of an unknown pagan. He was a Bible student, a *nomikos*, a scribe who watch-dogged people who spoke Torah. This law expert wanted to test Jesus, but not in a hostile fashion. He merely wanted to know whether he was genuine. People were gullible, especially with regard to matters of religion, so testing was required. It is interesting to note that Jesus was tested in all three locations where he ministered. In Galilee, he was tested in the wilderness; in Samaria, he was tested by this scribe; and in Jerusalem, he would be tested at the cross. If we are to follow him, it is good to remember that our Savior was tested.

There are two rounds in this encounter between the scribe and Jesus. Notice that in both rounds Jesus reversed the testing: first, he was tested, then the scribe was tested. The scribe began by asking a question, his field of expertise: "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He used the first person, which tends to be a disarming approach. He was asking for personal advice. Jesus, however, responded with a question of his own, which had the effect of putting them both on an equal footing: "What is written in the Law?" he asked. The expert answered well, and Jesus gave him his approval, telling the man that if he did this, he would live. There is no doubt that Jesus was referring to the immediate future; i.e. if the man did this he would come alive. (The verb "to do" is a present imperative, meaning "keep on doing.")

The scribe then asked a second question: "Who is my neighbor?" he wanted to know. This was an old matter for inquiry, one that was frequently argued among the rabbis. The inference was, was his neighbor his family? Was it the Jews who kept Torah, or Jews who

did not keep Torah? It could not possibly be the hated Samaritans, could it? If the man's first question had to do with theology, the second had to do with ethics. He was uneasy. He wanted to justify himself, so he tried to get the focus off of himself. He wanted eternal life, but only at his own price. How far did he have to go? This was what he wanted to know. He was interested in eternal life, but he wanted to earn it by doing the minimum.

Again in his reply, Jesus took the offense. He told a story, and then asked a question. Again the scribe answered well, and Jesus told him to go and do likewise.

The story, I suggest, is a parabolic ballad in seven scenes.<sup>1</sup> The first three scenes are characterized by the verbs "come," "do," and "go." Each of these people who came upon the injured man did something and then left. The robbers were the first on the scene. There were many thieves on the Jericho-Jerusalem road. This was a 17-mile journey, but it was nothing like our beautiful 17-Mile Drive on the Monterey Peninsula. The road to Jericho was cut through a desert. It was a desolate, lifeless route, with no rest stops—17 miles of wilderness. The man who fell among thieves is not described, but a Jewish audience would naturally assume that he was a Jew. The rabbis identified the different stages of death. The "half-dead" of the text is the equivalent of the rabbinic category of "next to death." The man was unconscious. He could not identify himself. Helping themselves to everything he had, the robbers left him half-dead.

The priest was the second character to come on the scene. A member of the upper classes, almost certainly he was riding a donkey. (In the Middle East, no one of status would embark on foot on a 17-mile journey through the desert.) We have to surmise that this man could have done what the Samaritan did, but he was a prisoner of his own legal/theological system. Communication with the half-dead man was impossible, and any distinctive dress he might have been wearing was missing, having been stolen by the robbers. He might not even be a Jew. Further, if he was dead, then contact with his body would defile the priest. Thus with a quick mental check of the theological rules, the priest decided to do nothing, passing by instead on the other side of the road.

In all likelihood the Levite knew that a priest was traveling ahead of him. The old Roman road had many contours, and visibility was good. Unlike the priest, however, this Levite was not bound by regulations, so he approached the man. The Levite may have feared being robbed. He may have feared being defiled. It is likely, however, that in passing by the injured man and continuing on his journey, he followed the example of the higher-ranking priest before him.

A few days ago while I was stopped at a traffic light, I saw a man standing in the median strip holding a sign saying, "I am very hungry." I was not in a compassionate mood, but I watched as the driver in the car ahead of me gave the man some money. My heart softened, and I reached into my pocket and gave him some money also. When I looked in my mirror, I noticed the driver behind me did the same thing. We tend to imitate what we see others doing. The priest passed by the injured man, and the Levite followed suit.

But the Samaritan broke this pattern. Following the appearance of the priest and the Levite in the story, the audience listening to Jesus probably expected a Jewish layman to be the next person to come on the scene. The Jews despised the hated Samaritans. They hated them even more than unbelievers. Jesus could have told a story about a noble Jew helping a hated Samaritan. Such a story could have been more easily absorbed. Remember that the Samaritan had

“compassion.” He had a gut-level, compassionate response to the injured man. The Samaritan was not a gentile. He was bound by the same Torah that told him his neighbor was his countryman and kinsman. He was less likely than the priest and the Levite to believe that the wounded man was a neighbor, nevertheless he acted with compassion. The priest went by the man on the other side of the road; the Levite approached him before going his way; but the Samaritan stopped to help him. It is important to note also that the Samaritan was a prime target for the same robbers who might respect a priest or a Levite, but not a hated Samaritan.

By his actions the Samaritan compensated for the robber, the priest, and the Levite, in inverse order; hence the inverted parallelism of the story. The climax comes in the center, with the unexpected compassion of the Samaritan. Then the story works its way back out, with the Samaritan acting to remedy each wrong done to the injured man. The Levite could at least have rendered first aid to the man, which was the Samaritan’s first action. The priest could have taken him to safety on his donkey, which the Samaritan proceeded to do. The robbers took his money and left him half-dead; they had no intention of returning. The Samaritan paid from his own pocket, leaving the man provided for, with a promise to return and pay more if needed.

The Samaritan first cleaned and softened the man’s wounds with oil; then he disinfected them with wine; and finally bound them up. The Levite could have rendered first aid, but he did not. The imagery can be understood to have Christological implications. The language used here is very similar to the language of Hosea 6. Further, the oil and wine were not only standard first-aid remedies, they were also sacrificial elements in the temple worship. “Pour” is the language of worship. The priest and the Levite were the religious professionals. They knew the prescribed liturgy. They were the ones who poured out the oil and the wine on the high altar before God. But it was the hated Samaritan, not the priest or the Levite, who poured out the libation on the altar of this man’s wounds. He was the one who poured out the true offering that was acceptable to God.

Next, the Samaritan put the man on his donkey and led him to the inn. The priest could have used his animal to take the man to safety, but he did not. The social distinctions between riders and leaders of riding animals was crucial in Ancient Middle Eastern society (see Est 6:7-11). The Samaritan took upon himself the form of a servant and led the donkey to the inn. (The inn probably was in Jericho; there were no inns in the middle of the desert.) By allowing himself to be thus identified, the Samaritan ran the risk of the injured man’s family finding him and taking vengeance on him, feeling that he might have been partially to blame. An American cultural equivalent would be a Plains Indian in 1875 walking into Dodge City with a scalped cowboy on his horse, checking into a room over the local saloon and staying the night to take care of him. Even today in the Middle East one does not stop for an accident. If one stops and attempts to help, it will be assumed he is to blame and he will be arrested. The Samaritan knew he was putting his life at risk, yet he did not hesitate to help the helpless, half-dead man.

Finally, by his actions the Samaritan compensated for the robbers. They robbed the man; the Samaritan paid for him. The robbers left him dying; the Samaritan left him in the hands of the innkeeper to be cared for. The robbers abandoned him; the Samaritan promised to return. The wounded man had no money. First century innkeepers had an unsavory reputation. If the man could not pay the bill, he would be arrested as a debtor. Thus if the Samaritan did not pledge

to pay his final bill, the injured man would be in trouble. Further, the Samaritan had no hope of being reimbursed. A Jew dealing with a Jew could have gotten his money back, but the Samaritan expected nothing in return for his lifesaving good deeds.

Thus in inverted order the Samaritan undid everything that had been done to the man.

How can we apply this story to our lives today? Two areas readily come to mind. One is obvious; the other perhaps not so obvious.

First, this passage makes a statement about salvation. The scribe (the Bible student) was seeking to save himself, to justify himself. What was the bottom line? was his question. What did he have to do to earn salvation? Using the language of the Holy Spirit, Jesus pointed out the impossibility of this. Salvation comes as a result of an act of unexpected love. This was how salvation came to the injured man—in the form of a costly demonstration of unexpected love.

In the process, the story seems to make a statement about the Savior himself. The exegetes of the early centuries consistently identified the Good Samaritan with Jesus. The Samaritan appeared suddenly and unexpectedly, and even though he was a rejected outsider, he acted to save. The traditional leaders of the community failed, but God’s agent came to bind up the wounds of the sufferer as the unique agent of God’s costly demonstration of unexpected love.

The bottom line of the story is that this act of love might well have cost the Samaritan his life. He was a member of a hated minority. People could well have assumed that he was the one who injured the Jew. The lynching party could well have been lying in wait for him in the morning. Yet, like Jesus, he made a choice to save, no matter the cost to him. We had an example of this kind of selfless love this past week. A man killed in the high rise murders in San Francisco made the choice to save his wife at the cost of his own life. John Sculley threw himself in front of the gunman’s bullets to protect his wife.

Hence, in this parable we have a clear statement of the gospel. It isn’t teaching; it isn’t proclamation. This is a story of compassion and love. It is your story; it is my story. We were “dead in our trespasses and sins,” lying on the side of the road. Sin had robbed us of life. No one could have helped us, even if they wanted to. And, as was the case in this story, religious professionals may well have been the ones least likely to become involved. But, unexpectedly, Christ came to our aid. He did not look like a Savior, but he cleaned our wounds, pouring out his blood on the cross to cleanse us. We were anointed with the Holy Spirit. He took us to a place where we could not take ourselves. He paid for us and placed us in the Father’s care. We did nothing. He did everything.

What can we do to inherit eternal life? Jesus’ answer is, “Nothing!” He is the one who must do it—all of it. In this, the language of *paraklesis*, we see the story of salvation, the story of God’s love. This parable illustrates what Christ has done for us: it tells us how deeply our heavenly Father loves us.

The week before last I was having one of those weeks we all experience now and again—confrontations, distractions, my car getting hit while parked at the repair shop, and other unpleasant surprises. Then on Wednesday I talked to one of the young women at our singles group, sensing she was a new Christian. She told me her story. Last March she was kidnapped while she was jogging in a park. She was thrown into a van, but she jumped out even as the van was reaching 40 m.p.h. She injured her leg, and she required physical therapy. There she met a young man who shared Christ with her.

Two months ago, she became a Christian. Hearing her story was the highlight of my week. It was the story of Christ, the story of the Good Samaritan. In the midst of a tension-filled week, I was again reminded in the language of the Holy Spirit of the mercy and goodness of our God.

Secondly, this parable gives us a dynamic concept of who our neighbor is. The question, “Who is my neighbor?” is restated to become, “To whom must I become a neighbor?” The answer is, everyone who is in need—even an enemy. A neighbor is literally, a “near one,” he or she who is close, the one you encounter who is in need.

But there are many difficulties associated with loving a neighbor, aren't there? The question, “Who is my neighbor?” gives rise to other questions. For instance, are we interruptible? One impediment to being a neighbor is that we are always busy, always headed someplace, and usually late. The priest and the Levite were trying to get to their destinations and they were not going to be interrupted. The Samaritan wasn't going anywhere; he could be interrupted. In our society we tend to not be interruptible unless it is for call waiting.

Once when I was driving to Lake Tahoe in the winter I had to stop and put chains on my car wheels. I hate to put on chains. Cold hands, a feeling of ineptness, and seemingly endless traffic can dampen even the hardest spirit. An older gentleman parked his car right next to mine and asked a question about putting chains on his tires. I responded, but I didn't offer him any practical help. Later, my children asked why I hadn't helped him. I felt crushed. I had been in-between. I wasn't at home and I hadn't reached my destination. I had a plan, I couldn't be deterred, so I failed to respond to his need.

What we learn while walking with Jesus in Samaria is the capacity to see interruptions as part of God's plan for our lives. If we can't see people while we are walking on the road, then we will miss what God wants to do in us. He wants to love through us in a costly way, in the same way he loved through the sacrifice of his own Son.

And we have to ask the question, do we feel compassion? We can easily fall into the same trap as the priest and the Levite. We know all the right religious things to do, but we are trapped by our theological system. The reality of who we are in Christ becomes overshadowed by other, less important things. We can attend all the right meetings, and get our children to attend, too, but all the while we are never moved in our gut. Because of our dullness we never feel the drawing of the Holy Spirit. We are well schooled in religion, in law, in justifying ourselves, in questioning people who might be a bit off, but we are not schooled in feeling compassion and responding appropriately. Violence has become a form of escape. We see it on television; we see it in the movies. Thus, when we see the real thing, we aren't easily moved because our hearts have been hardened. Jesus wept. The good Samaritan was moved to compassion. Sometimes we, too, need a gut check.

Will it cost us to be a Good Samaritan and are we willing to pay the cost? The text makes it clear that it will be costly. Loving a near one will cost us time, money, or energy, perhaps all three. Our model is Christ. Loving us cost us him his life. Loving the man on the road to Jericho likely cost the Samaritan his life. What kinds of sacrifices are we ready to make? Are we ready to buy gas for someone stranded on the road, knowing we will not be repaid? Will we buy a meal for someone who is homeless? Will we bake something for the difficult people down the street? Will we spend the night at the hospital, loving someone who is desperately ill?

God is not interested so much in our going out and doing something. He does not ask us to solve all the problems of humanity. What he wants is for us to be the right type of people—interruptible, compassionate, willing to suffer and sacrifice when the need arises.

Tony Campolo tells a wonderful story of a time when he was in Hawaii. Hungry and unable to sleep, he decided to go out for a donut at 3 o'clock in the morning. In the local greasy spoon a number of prostitutes were sitting at a table. One woman, Agnes, was telling the others that she would be 39 years old the next day and she had never had a birthday party given for her. After the women left, Tony approached the cafe owner and asked the man if he was interested in giving Agnes a birthday party the next night. He offered to get balloons, streamers and a cake. The owner quickly agreed, but he insisted on buying the cake. Word about the party quickly spread among the people of the evening, the prostitutes, the homeless, the cast-offs of society. Next night the place was packed. Around 3:30 a.m. Agnes came in. She was speechless when she saw what was going on. When the time came to cut the cake, she asked if she could take it home to show her mother before she cut it. When she left, no one knew quite what to do. It was awkward; there was tension in the air. Not knowing what else to do, Tony suggested everyone pray. The owner looked at him and said, “I knew it!” I knew you had to be a preacher or a minister or something. What kind of church do you go to?” Tony replied, “I go to a church that gives birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning!” “No you don't,” said the owner, “because if there was a church like that, I'd be there.”

Every day we are walking in Samaria, in between, neither at home nor yet arrived at our destination. As we travel this road there will be opportunities to relive the story of the Good Samaritan and thus demonstrate the love and grace of our heavenly Father. As we have eyes to see beyond the obvious, Jesus will expand our horizons, our theological grids.

This parable of the Good Samaritan leaves us with a penetrating question. The story began with the scribe's question to Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” but it ends with, “Will you be a neighbor?” Then comes our Lord's gentle exhortation, “Go and do likewise.”

1. Thanks to Eugene Peterson and Kenneth Bailey for their insightful studies in the parables.

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Catalog No. 926

Luke 11:1-13

Second Message

John Hanneman

July 11, 1993

## “LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY”

*SERIES: PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM*

If I were to ask you what is the one thing you would most like to improve in your relationship with God, what would your answer be? I'd venture to say that if we surveyed the congregation this morning, most people would say that they would like to pray more. That would be my response certainly.

Christians making New Year resolutions almost always put prayer near the top of the list. We resolve to eat less, get more exercise, read the Bible, and pray more often. We start getting up half an hour earlier in the morning to read the Bible and pray. Usually this lasts but a short time, then the next crisis strikes and we have to rearrange our schedules. It is probably true to say, therefore, that for most Christians prayer is like dialing 911: we only use it in emergencies.

Is there something that will help us move beyond good intentions to a lifestyle of praying? Once, when the disciples said to Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray,” he responded by telling them a parable. Today we will look at what he said.

In this series of messages we are studying the parables of Jesus from the gospel of Luke. Jesus was in Samaria when he delivered these parables, a place in-between Galilee and Jerusalem, a place in-between home and destination. As the disciples were walking and wandering with Jesus in this place he used the language of parables, the language of the Holy Spirit, to blow apart their categories, expand their thinking and give them a greater vision of God. His parables, as we have seen, contain truth that requires thought. Parables are not mere teaching or proclamation. They have a way of entering through a side door of the mind, in a manner of speaking, but once inside, they explode.

Our text is taken from Luke 11:

**And it came about that while He was praying in a certain place, after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, “Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples.” And He said to them, “When you pray, say: ‘Father, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, For we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation.’” And He said to them, “Suppose one of you shall have a friend, and shall go to him at midnight, and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him’; and from inside he shall answer and say, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs. And I say to you, ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it shall be opened. Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he?**

**Or if he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?” (LUKE 11:1-13 NASB)**

This is the only occasion recorded in the gospels that the disciples asked Jesus to teach them something. Our Lord, as the text says, was praying at a certain place. Already the disciples had watched him do this throughout a couple of years of ministry. To them it was a common sight, part of everyday life with Jesus. At last, one of them asked, “Lord, teach us to pray.” This was not a request for instruction about behavior or theology. They wanted to be trained in source action. They recognized that prayer was central to the life of Jesus, in fact it was the very key to his spiritual life. They knew all the Jewish requirements for prayer: the appropriate prayer for certain occasions, how often they were to pray, etc., but something was missing in their experience.

Jesus responded by illustrating with a brief model prayer; then he told them an odd-sounding parable, and followed this with a brief antidote. His instructions on prayer were surprisingly brief. The text can be read in a mere 75 seconds. At the bookstore you can find an entire shelf of books on prayer, but Jesus would not have one among them. He would not have made the best seller list. What he said on the subject would not have filled a book.

We are used to being schooled and having things explained to us, but some activities, like walking, talking, loving, hoping, aren't learned in school. For instance, how many of you went to a class to learn how to ride a bicycle, or sent your children to a class to learn this skill? Riding a bicycle is learned by a child as his parents walk or run alongside him. It is the same with prayer. We learn to pray by observing and listening to someone who is praying.

Jesus' prayer here in Luke's gospel appears in a slightly different form from the parallel account in Matthew 6. Luke was familiar with the account in Matthew, but evidently he changed and shortened it. He begins with just the word “Father,” omitting the words “our” and “in heaven.” Luke also omits the phrases “your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” “deliver us from the evil one,” and “yours is the kingdom.” The six petitions in Matthew become five in Luke's gospel: “Hallowed be your name; come (your kingdom); give us our daily bread; forgive; lead us not.”

Jesus follows his prayer with the parable, which is given in two stanzas, the first in verses 5-7, the second in verse 8. Clearly the theme of the parable centers on the idea of giving: “friend, lend me three loaves...I can't get up and give you anything...even though he will not give him...he will give him as much as he needs.”

Verses 5-7 could easily be rendered as a question: “Can you imagine this happening?” An emphatic negative answer is anticipated. Thus the response of verses 5-7 is what will not happen, while that of verse 8 is what will happen.

Once again, cultural nuances are critical. In this instance, the notion of hospitality must be carefully examined. Oriental/Middle Eastern hospitality is legendary. The listener or reader could not imagine being given silly excuses about a closed door and sleeping children when the entertainment of a guest was at stake. These hypothetical excuses were so unthinkable they were humorous. Our singles ministry people have been greeted with marvelous hospitality in the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico in recent years. Families move out of their homes so that our young people can have lodging. We have even had offers from villagers who have two turkeys to kill one of them for us to take home.

In the parable, the guest arrived at midnight. Apparently, because of the intense heat in the desert, traveling was done at night. The host asked his friend for three loaves, more than were needed probably but, in keeping with custom, the host would have to put before the guest more than the number of loaves required for one adult meal. And he would know who had fresh-baked bread in the village. Further, custom demanded that he serve his guest, and the guest had to eat, no matter how late it was. Our staff encountered this custom a number of years ago in Indonesia. In a remote village we held an evening church service, and following the meeting we went to someone's home to eat a meal. It was late, but that didn't seem to matter. I was sick, but I still had to eat. Our hosts served us their very best fare. They didn't even eat with us, but remained out of sight, appearing only to serve us when we needed food. This was the kind of hospitality demanded here in this setting in the parable.

A crucial element in the parable is that the visitor was a guest of the community, not just the individual mentioned. Their reputation was at stake. In the Yucatan, we learned, the entire village cares for their guests. They watched over the houses where we stayed. Unasked, they washed our laundry. They gave up their precious water so we could take showers. Once, when one of the young women on our team went for a walk, the villagers sent out a search party, thinking she might be in danger. The whole community was involved in making us feel welcome and secure.

The host in the parable had plenty of food. The words, "I have nothing adequate to set before him," convey that the host wanted the best so that the honor of the village would be upheld. Finally, bread was the humblest element of the meal. Bread was not the meal, rather it was the knife, fork and spoon with which the meal was eaten. The host would also have borrowed a tray, pitcher, cloth, and goblets. The neighbor ended up offering "whatever he needed."

The significance of the passage hangs on the meaning of the key word in verse 8, which is translated "shamelessness" or "persistence." Shamelessness is a negative quality; persistence is a positive one. Some say this word describes the host. He got what he wanted because he was persistent: he kept knocking at the door. (Chapter 18 of this gospel records a parable about a widow that seems to have the same thrust.) But that was not what was happening here. In this story, the subject of the stanza was the sleeper, not the host. The word must therefore apply to him. Further support for this is found in the fact that the host got whatever he wanted, not just what he needed, from a reluctant giver.

Everywhere in Greek literature, this word points to a negative quality, hence the translation "persistence." The word, however, comes from a term which can have two meanings: a sense of shame (positive), or shame (negative). Shame is an extremely important emotion in Middle Eastern society. While some areas of life are gov-

erned by law, much of life is controlled by the "shame" (negative) that is to be avoided because of the individual's "sense of shame" (positive), i.e. his sense of honor, involvement or commitment. The translator began with a word denoting a negative quality, then he changed the term slightly to negate it, and thus ended up with what was for him a positive quality.

The sleeper knew the borrower had to gather up the essentials for the banquet from various neighbors. If the sleeper refused the request for something as humble as a loaf of bread, the host would continue on his rounds, cursing the stinginess of the sleeper who would not get up even to fulfill this trifling request. The story would be all over the village by morning. His name would be mud; he would be met with the cries of "Shame!" everywhere he went. Because of his desire to avoid being shamed, therefore, and because he was committed to community and relationships, he would get out of bed and grant whatever the borrower requested. The fact that the host received much more than bread is evidence that the entire transaction was completed in a spirit of goodwill.

What does all of this say about prayer? And how did Jesus answer his disciples? We could talk for a long time about the Lord's prayer, the five verbs of the prayer, etc., but Jesus seemed to be emphasizing certain things.

First, he gave the spiritual condition that was necessary for prayer. Poverty, according to Jesus, is the condition needed for prayer. In both the prayer and the parable there is something central about bread. "Give us our daily bread" is the center line in the prayer: "Lend me three loaves" is the host's request. Bread is the most basic element of the meal. To request bread was to admit poverty. The gospel always climaxes where you least expect it: in a stable, in the upper room, in the garden of Gethsemane, in the washing of feet, in the provision of daily bread.

Prayer should be anchored to our most immediate needs. When we are poor, we pray. If we are to enter into what Jesus teaches on prayer, therefore, we must accept this place of poverty. Like children, we must begin with our most basic need. Unless we realize our poverty we will live dehumanized, anti-social lives. But sin keeps us from recognizing our condition, while pride keeps us from confessing it. We need to recognize our need, our poverty. If we do not, we will not pray, and our worship will be insincere. If on the other hand prayer comes as a result of wealth, it is only religious consumerism; it stems merely from a want.

Ray Stedman wrote,

We must either be praying or fainting; there is no other alternative. The purpose of all faith is to bring us into direct, personal, vital touch with God. True prayer is an awareness of our helpless need and an acknowledgment of divine adequacy. For Jesus, prayer was as necessary as breathing, the very breath of his life.

Jesus said in John 5:19, "The Son can do nothing of Himself." Perhaps this is why prayer is so difficult for us: we have to admit our poverty. This is hard to do, isn't it? Often when people are told about God, they respond by saying, "That's fine if you need something. But I'm not needy. I'm able to take care of myself. God helps those who help themselves." If you do not need God, however, then you will never talk to him. Take away all the externals—your clothes, car, home, furniture, vacation, career, title, abilities—and what is left? Are you poor materially and spiritually? If you are, count yourself fortunate. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God." After studying

“LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY”

this material my morning prayer has become, “Father, I need daily bread.”

Poverty, then, is the condition necessary for prayer.

The second thing Jesus teaches has to do with the language of prayer. Notice that in his prayer, all the verbs are voiced in the imperative mood. The controlling verb in the parable, “give,” is an imperative. The host is bold; he has a sense of urgency in his request. Then, following the parable, Jesus uses the imperatives “ask, seek, knock.” The request is not a demand. It is a statement of truth, of fact: “God, I need you.”

Once semester in college I was concerned whether I could complete the course work assigned. I was getting an “A” in one class, so I decided to ask my professor if I could skip the final. I explained to him that it would be of no benefit to me to take the final. I had other work needing completion, so would he allow me to skip the final? I asked. To my surprise, he agreed. (I tried this tactic later, but it never worked again.)

But God is always approachable. We can come to him again and again and make our requests to him in prayer. The imperative is the form of speech that changes the way things are. It changes the present; it reaches into the future. The present tense of the verbs “ask,” “seek,” and “knock” indicate continued action. “Keep on asking” implies a faith that makes requests; “keep on seeking,” indicates a sincerity that is more than casual; “keep on knocking” shows that initial barriers are not to be seen as final refusals. Prayer does not begin in acquiescence; prayer is action that creates change. God is approachable. If you ask, you will not have your head bitten off. You can come to him boldly and ask, seek, knock. James has an appropriate word for us here: “You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives” (James 4:2-3).

Third, Jesus lets the disciples in on the secret of prayer. The secret is understanding the nature of God. The disciples asked our Lord how to pray, but what he really did was tell them about the Father. Notice that “Father” is the first word in Jesus’ short prayer. The Jews were used to beginning their prayers by saying, “Lord God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, God most high, creator of heaven and earth, our shield and the shield of our fathers.” But Jesus merely said, “Father.” He reemphasized the notion of fatherhood at the end, saying a father who is asked by his son for a fish will not give him a snake; if you know how to give good gifts to you children, how much more will your heavenly Father give, etc. And what Jesus tells us about his Father is that he gives. His very nature is a giver.

In the parable, everything was stacked against the host. It was night; the neighbor and his children were asleep; the door was locked. Yet the neighbor would give even more than was requested because he was a man of integrity, honor, and shamelessness, and he would not violate those qualities. The God to whom we pray also has an integrity that he will not violate. And beyond this, he loves us. Some people think the neighbor in the parable is included in the story to set him in contrast to God, but I think Jesus is using a theme from the culture and building on it to demonstrate the very nature of God. Even if the neighbor was reluctant, God is not. We do not get from God because we are persistent; we get because God is a giver. It is his nature to give.

I take great delight in giving to my three children. I would rather give to them than give to myself, even when they are rebellious. That is the nature of fatherhood. Understanding the nature of the Fa-

ther is the key to praying. Prayer should always be personal, never indifferent. If we understand who we are and who God is, then we will pray naturally. God is our Father; we are sons and daughters. Everything is based on knowing in our hearts that this is true. If we understand the nature of Father, then we will pray. We will relate to God in an intimate, confident way as we would to a loving and caring father. If we do not understand this, then our attempts at praying will be routine—external actions with no relationship. This perhaps is why the disciples asked Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

A couple of weeks ago there was an article in *Time* magazine on fatherhood and the growing problem of fatherless homes. David Blankenhorn, the founder of the Institute for American Values in New York City, said: “This trend of fatherlessness is the most socially consequential family trend of our generation...As children get older, noted William Maddox, director of research and policy at the Washington based Family Research Council, fathers become crucial in their physical and psychological development. Studies of young criminals have found that more than 70% of all juveniles in state reform institutions come from fatherless homes.” The article opened with a story about Megan, an 8-year-old fatherless girl. When she was asked what fathers do, she responded: “Love you. They kiss you and hug you when you need them.” When she was asked what would she like to do with her dad, she said, “I’d want him to talk to me...I wish I had somebody to talk to.”

As I was growing up, I did not have many deep conversations with my father. I like to talk about deep, not surface things, and I kept trying to talk on that level with my father. But although he loved me very much there was not that deep level of communication that I desired. In my twenties, I decided to take a new approach. My father and mother came to visit us in California, and when they arrived, I gave him a hug, something I had not done since I was very young. He was not a tall man, but he was a big man, with big hands and strong arms. When I hugged him, he gave me the biggest bear-hug I ever had. At that moment I learned something about him that changed my relationship with him. I had thought he might be a bit shallow, but in that instant I realized that he never revealed his deeper feelings because he was afraid he would cry. He did not know how to express his emotions. But from that day forward whenever we met we didn’t have to talk a lot. We hugged and kissed and said we loved each other. The communication barrier between us was removed. We had an intimate, although non-verbal relationship.

This is the place we need to come to in our relationship with God. We need to see him as a Father who loves us and desires to have a relationship with us, a Father who wants to give to us. This may be hard for some who perhaps did not experience this with their own fathers; there is a barrier that needs to be breached. This is what will motivate us to pray.

Jesus says that the secret to prayer is having the correct view of God.

Finally, our Lord gives assurance for answered prayer. If we are confident of having our needs met when we go to a neighbor in the night; if we are confident that our own father will not give us a snake when we ask for a fish, or a scorpion when we ask for an egg; if earthly fathers who are evil know how to give good gifts to their children; then how much more can we rest assured when we take our requests to a loving, heavenly Father? He who asks, receives. He who seeks, finds. To him who knocks, it shall be opened.

Does this mean that we will get everything we ask for? My own experience has taught me that we won't. I do know, however, that God wants to give me the character of Christ—love, wisdom, patience, strength. I can ask for these things in faith. Other things I am not so sure about. But I know that if God is truly my loving Father, then he will filter my requests accordingly. It would not have been in my best interests to receive everything I have asked from God. So, God may not give me everything I want, but I can trust him to give me everything I need. With some things there might be a delay, but if I knock and keep on knocking, this will deepen my dependence upon him.

Notice that the text says God will respond. He will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him. Is this referring to conversion, when we receive the Holy Spirit into our lives? Certainly it is true that when we ask to receive Christ, God will give us his Spirit. However, this is a word to believers. It doesn't mean that the Spirit comes again and again, but rather that we need to be continually filled with the Spirit, to be strengthened with power in our inner being through God's Spirit.

Sometimes then we don't get what we want, but we can be assured of receiving the Holy Spirit who ministers to the deepest needs of our hearts. We receive God himself, his presence in our lives. This is the meaning of the words of Psalm 73, "My flesh and my heart may fail; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever...as for me, the nearness of God is my good."

Last week, the elders of our church gathered around Art David's hospital bed to pray for our brother who has been stricken with cancer. We prayed for healing. This is what we want, but we don't know if it is what we need. We asked, and then we turned the matter over to God. We were assured of one thing, however: God was near. The presence of the Spirit was evident and the joy of the Lord overflowed. The most critical prayer was answered as we beheld Art's countenance. This is what our Father God most readily gives.

Most of us would say we need to pray more, but Jesus didn't say a lot about prayer when he was asked by his disciples to teach them to pray. He told them that the condition for prayer is poverty; the language is imperative; and the secret to praying is knowing and understanding our Father. And if we understand our Father, then we can be assured that he will hear and respond to our deepest needs. This is what Jesus modeled to his disciples.

Ray Stedman put it this way:

The greatest thing anyone can do for God and man is pray. It is not the only thing; but it is the chief thing. The great people of the earth today are the people who pray. I do not mean those who talk about prayer; nor those who say they believe in prayer; nor yet those who can explain about prayer; but I mean those people who take time to pray.

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Luke 12:13-21

Third Message

John Hanneman

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## CAN WEALTH SECURE YOUR FUTURE?

*SERIES: PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM*

I once heard a story about a woman who asked the pastor of a Lutheran church to conduct a funeral service for her dog. He told her he was sorry he could not accommodate her, and suggested she contact the Pentecostal minister across the street. She asked how much she should offer to pay the man for his services. "How much did you have in mind?" asked the minister. "About \$1,000," she replied. "Oh, my goodness!" said the minister. "I didn't realize the dog was a Lutheran!"

At some point in our lives, all of us begin to set financial priorities and establish emotional attachments to our possessions. Last week, my son broke a sugar bowl which my wife and I bought in Europe some years ago. When I asked him how it happened, he didn't seem overly concerned about it. It was just an accident, he said. I asked him how he would feel if I came to him and told him I had broken his snowboard. "Oh," he replied, "that would be different." Possessions are not bad in themselves, but if we grow too fond of them, our priorities can become skewed.

One of the most important questions we will ever have to answer is, what is it that will really grant us life? Our Lord's parable of the rich fool, from chapter 12 of the gospel of Luke, gives the unambiguous answer to this question.

Luke 12:13-21:

**And someone in the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But He said to him, "Man, who appointed Me a judge or arbiter over you?" And He said to them, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions." And He told them a parable, saying, "The land of a certain rich man was very productive. And he began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?' And he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry."' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?' So is the man who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." (Luke 12:13-21 NASB)**

An unnamed man stepped out of the crowd listening to Jesus and said he was being defrauded out of his inheritance. In Jesus' day, rabbis were regarded as judges, so the man's request was not out of line. Rabbis were expected to be knowledgeable regarding the law, and competent to give a legal ruling. This is by no means an uncommon complaint. The man's father had died and left his inheritance, in all likelihood lands and property, as a unit to his sons. Psalm 133:1 reflects on how pleasant it is when brothers manage to cooperate harmoniously in such situations: "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity," says the psalm.

Dividing family possessions is a common source of tension. It can be an emotional time for siblings. I learned this firsthand when my mother died last year. Following the funeral, my brothers and I had only one afternoon to sort through all the family belongings. Even though we did so with a good spirit, it was a difficult time for us.

Notice our Lord's response. First, he refused to be taken in by the man's seemingly legitimate question. Jesus' scope of ministry did not include passing judgment on legal matters. He refused to offer specific advice, and abruptly dismissed the matter. Leon Morris observed, "He came to bring men to God, not property to man."

Jesus knew that greed and covetousness lay behind the man's request. The petitioner was not asking for arbitration, rather he was ordering Jesus, the judge, to carry out his wishes. He had already decided what he wanted and was merely trying to use Jesus to get it. He actually was seeking help to pressure his brother to finalize a division between them. The rabbis taught that if one heir wanted a division of the inheritance, it should be granted. Thus the demanding petitioner was saying, in effect, "Give me my rights."

We have a penchant to disguise our sin, clothing it with what we purport to be the will of God. We try to adorn our sin with virtue. Here, the man was packaging his greed in the guise of justice. Satan hides the evil in the good. But Jesus saw through the man's ruse. A friend of my wife came over to visit one evening and began complaining about her husband. It was obvious that she was seeking to garner our support, and the name of God, for her cause. She may have had a legitimate complaint, but she was seeking to use us. This was what the man in the parable was trying to do with Jesus.

But Jesus quickly voiced his disapproval. "Look to yourself first," was his response (see Luke 13:1-3). The salutation, "O man" (verse 14), usually was uttered to introduce a complaint against the one being addressed. Obviously the man and his brother had a broken relationship, and the petitioner wanted that finalized by a complete separation. But Jesus insisted that he had not come as an arbiter or divider. The obvious alternative, of course, is reconciler. The word "divider" (*meristes* in Greek) is a rare word. If the "r" is dropped and the "i" moved, it becomes *mesites*, which means reconciler. Jesus was not demonstrating indifference to the claims of legal justice; rather he was insisting that there was a greater gain than getting an inheritance, and a greater loss than losing one.

Jesus went on to respond with a parable (verses 16-20), which is bracketed with a couple of general principles (verses 15, 21). The petitioner, said Jesus, would not have his problem solved even if his brother granted him his portion of the inheritance (verse 15); and he ended the matter by giving a contrast between laying up treasures for oneself and being rich towards God (verse 21).

The parable introduces a first-century Yuppie. We are not told how he gained his riches, but his method of acquiring them is not criticized. Apparently they were the gift of God. Not only did he

have more than enough, but he was given the gift of a bumper crop. His problem lay in what to do with the unearned surpluses. He debated with himself and took time to come up with a solution. In the Middle East, such debates normally would have taken place in the city gate, where decisions were made in community. Even the smallest transaction would be worthy of discussion. But this man had no one to talk to. He was a prisoner of his own wealth because greed had isolated him from the community. His solution was to tear down his old barns and build bigger ones. There was where he would lay up his treasure. It is helpful to remember that tithes and offerings were to be set aside in barns, where the priests and the Levites would come to collect them. The rich man was hoarding and stockpiling his wealth.

He thought his wealth had secured his future, but he was mistaken. He made his plan, but God had another plan. One night, unexpectedly, God came for the soul of this man whom he described as a fool.

What can we learn from this parable about the spirituality of wealth? First, I would say, we learn that real life does not stem from possessions. This was the principle Jesus gave in verse 15 in the words, “for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.”

We can observe this principle in the lives of both the rich man of the parable and the man who came to Jesus. In the story, Jesus became a judge over the brothers, not between them. He judged the motives of their hearts, not the amount they had stashed away in their bank accounts.

There is something that is even more important than justice. The word for “life” refers to a special quality of life that is not merely physical. According to Jesus, this kind of life does not come from possessions. The rich man foolishly thought he had life by the tail. He imagined he would be able to eat, drink and be merry for years to come.

But this is a great deception. We are so easily fooled into thinking that if we acquire things, we will have a better, more enjoyable, more comfortable life. So we seek an enriched quality of life by acquiring possessions in the fond hope that if we can only acquire enough material things, they will produce the abundant life for us. Thus we begin making lists, and planning on how we might acquire things.

But this acquisitiveness can become a sickness. It is called greed. Greed, the desire to possess things, is subtle, but it is a sin which drew harsher words from Jesus than either adultery or drunkenness. Greed affects both rich and poor alike. Being poor doesn't prevent one from being greedy. It doesn't matter whether we are in the right or not, whether we deserve it or not or whether we can afford it or not, we are infected with an insatiable desire to acquire possessions. But we find that the more we acquire, the more we want. We are not satisfied, so we build bigger barns. Someone once asked John D. Rockefeller how much money was enough. “One dollar more,” was his response.

A sobering illustration of the deceitfulness of greed is found in the story of Ahab and Naboth in 1 Kings 21. Ahab saw the vineyard of Naboth and coveted it. He offered him money or land, but Naboth would not think of parting with the family inheritance. As a consequence, Ahab moped around the palace like a child. He was vexed and sullen and he would not eat food. He had it all, everything he wanted, but he was not content. Overcome with covetousness and greed, all he could think about was what he didn't have. When

Jezebel found out why Ahab was so upset, she trumped up charges against Naboth, with the result that he was stoned to death. Ahab's greed resulted in the death of Naboth.

After I graduated from college I moved to California and got my first job, and for the first time in my life I began making real money. Possessions were hard to come by when I was growing up. My goal had always been to acquire only what would fit in my car if I ever decided to head out. But now at last, real possessions were within my grasp. I made a list of things I wanted to buy—a football, a basketball, skis, a sleeping bag (you can tell what was important to me back then). I got a great deal of satisfaction from acquiring something that I wanted and checking it off my list. Over the years that list has grown; the items have changed and have gotten more expensive. But now I can readily see that there is no end to the list and there is no way I will ever acquire all the things I once felt I had to have.

Acquiring possessions is a major focus here in Silicon Valley. There are more playthings, more games, more trinkets available than anyone could possibly use. Then there are the options to consider. Do you get option A or B? If you get option B, you can add other options later. We are consumed consumers!

But Jesus says we have to be on our guard. Greed, not life, is what will result from the things we spend a lifetime acquiring. If we see something we want, we have to ask ourselves why we want it. If we think it will give us life, we must correct our thinking quickly before the possession becomes just another idol in our home. When we don't expect to receive life from our acquisitions, our greed is checked.

Second, we really don't “own” the possessions we acquire; God owns them. The rich man failed to grasp this, though. Notice his five-fold use of the possessive pronoun “my”: *my* crops, *my* barns, *my* grain, *my* goods. He even referred to *my* soul. He imagined that what he possessed was his to keep, that he had final authority and control over everything. But he was mistaken. His possessions, even his soul, were only on loan to him. The word “required” in verse 20 was commonly used to refer to the repayment of a loan. The rich man's soul was on loan, and the owner wanted the loan returned. His possessions would be transferred or loaned to someone else, and the rich man didn't even know who that would be.

We are greatly deceived if we think we *own* our possessions. Proof that we do not own them, of course, is that we cannot take them with us. We bring nothing into this life and we take nothing out of it. When we go through the door called “death,” we pass through, in a manner of speaking, something like airport security gates where we have to take all the coins out of our pockets and put our carry-on luggage on the conveyor belt. But there is a difference: unlike airport security gates, after we pass through the door of death, everything we owned is gone forever. I had a graphic reminder of this just yesterday when I visited a woman whose husband died recently. She showed me the box that contained his ashes, and there was not one of his possessions in it. Billy Graham once said, “You will never see a U-Haul trailer driving behind a hearse.”

This principle applies to everything we have—our homes and all our possessions, our health, our spouses, our children. We must learn that if we think our possessions are ours to keep, then, in effect, they will “own” us. The parable teaches us to hold things loosely, to not attach too much value or importance to money and possessions because they are not ours to begin with.

Third, we are fools if we think that wealth can secure our future. The rich fool reminds me of the story of the stockbroker who encountered a genie on the way to the office. Granted one wish, the stockbroker asked for a copy of his local newspaper one year hence. He hurriedly turned to the stock market page to plan his killing in stocks, but he got more than he bargained for. On the opposite page he spied his picture in an obituary describing his death in an automobile accident.

The text has an interesting word play. The rich man was planning his future. The word translated “to be merry, to enjoy oneself” comes from the Greek verb, *euphraino*. The noun form is *euphron*, which speaks of a state of self-enjoyment. The word “very productive” in verse 16 is from the same root word in Greek, *euphoreo*, meaning, to bring forth plenty. The formula is, if you bring forth many things and store them up, then you will secure the future and you will enjoy all aspects of the good life. But God’s plan for the future is very different from the rich man’s. God called him a fool. The word for fool is *aphron*. Only the prefix has changed. God was saying to the man that instead of the good life (*euphron*), many things will yield foolishness (*aphron*), namely, without mind, spirit, and emotions. The rich man was a fool because he thought he could secure his future with money.

In the 1950’s, the European wrestling champion, Yussif the Turk, came to America to fight “Strangler” Lewis for the “world championship” and \$5000. Yussif won, and he insisted he be paid the \$5000 in gold, which he stuffed into his championship belt. The money mattered so much to him that he refused to remove the belt until he had reached home safely. Boarding the first available ship for Europe, he headed home. But halfway across the Atlantic, the ship floundered in a storm and began to sink. In a panic, Yussif jumped for a lifeboat and missed. He went straight to the bottom of the ocean. His golden belt had become a golden anchor.

We live in a society where most people are occupied with doing what the rich man sought to do. We busily set up retirement schemes, planning our future financial security in an effort to try and control our destiny. The investment commercials on television even strive to make us feel guilty if we haven’t already achieved financial security. Not having to worry about finances sounds like a wonderful thing, doesn’t it? But it is a fallacy.

Does this mean that we are never to plan for the future? Certainly not. We should be good stewards of the gifts that God has given us. But we must not drift along with every wind of change, viewing things non-critically, thinking we can plan for and control our destiny, fixing our hope on the uncertainty of riches. James has an appropriate word for us here: “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow, we shall go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.’ Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and also do this or that’” (James 4:13-15).

Only the fool imagines that money will secure his future.

Fourth, since life comes only from God, the exhortation is to become rich toward him. The encounter ends with another principle, in verse 21: “So is the man who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich towards God.” The man was a fool. He had built his life around things that couldn’t last and possessions that really didn’t matter. Then he died, surrounded by his wealth, poor, lonely and

friendless, not knowing who would gather his goods. If you plan alone and build alone, you will die alone.

There are some things money cannot buy. Money will buy a bed, but not rest. Money will buy books, but not wisdom. Money will buy a house, but not a home. Money will buy pleasure, but not joy. Money will buy a crucifix, but not a Savior.

An enormously rich man complained to a psychiatrist that despite his great wealth, which enabled him to have whatever he desired, he still felt miserable. The psychiatrist took the man to the window overlooking the street and asked, “What do you see?” The man replied, “I see men, women, and children.” The psychiatrist then took the man to stand in front of a mirror and asked, “Now what do you see?” The man said, “I see only myself.” The psychiatrist then said, “In the window there is glass and in the mirror there is glass, and when you look through the glass in the window, you see others, but when you look into the glass of the mirror you see only yourself.” “The reason for this,” said the psychiatrist, “is that behind the glass in the mirror is a layer of silver. When silver is added, you cease to see others. You only see yourself.”

Our Lord’s parable strikes at covetousness in all its forms, in every area of life. Will our wealth be a means of personal power or extravagant love? Do we store up God’s gifts for ourselves or do we take the surplus gifts and offer them to God for his use? Let us share our riches with others. When we realize wealth, we become liable to greed. We covet and then we hoard. Concerned about our own leisure and luxury, we refuse to share. We begin thinking of wealth as power to be applied, not love to be shared. If a man gets everything he wants, however, it will only succeed in drawing him farther away from God.

Rather than being controlled by greed, let us strive to become rich toward God. We are not called to be rich fools or complaining brothers. We are called to have treasure in heaven that will never be exhausted. Paul told Timothy to “instruct those who are rich not to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed.” According to Paul, becoming rich toward God means being rich in good works, generous and ready to share.

If we really want to secure the future then, we need to become rich toward God, to store up treasures in heaven. We may never own a mansion or a Mercedes, or enjoy a cruise around the world, but each one of us has opportunity to become rich toward God. Abundant life comes from him. We may not all have the same financial opportunities, but we all have the same spiritual opportunities. We are always wealthy spiritually, even if we are not wealthy materially. We can lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven “where moth and rust do not consume.” If you want proof of this, take a trip to Mexico or some other Third World country and live with Christians there who are materially poor. You will soon discover that they are the ones who are rich and we are the ones who are poor.

We cannot live in both worlds. The sooner we determine where we are going to make our investment, where we are going to put our hearts and hope and love, the better off we will be. One world we can secure, the other we can’t. Only the fool thinks he can.

David Roper has written, “The bottom line of all investment is return. What do we get for our effort? If we invest solely in things on

the earth, we'll lose them all. But if we invest ourselves in knowing God and in loving Him, it's an investment that's truly secure."

One day in Samaria, the in-between place, the place between home and destination, a man stepped out of the crowd and made a demand of Jesus. But he got much more than he bargained for. If it was life he really wanted, then he had to change his heart. The parable ends with a question: "Who will own what you have prepared?" We are not given the answer. Speculation is futile. The parable is just enough "off" to require our involvement. It is neither an explanation nor an illustration. It requires participation. It preserves the integrity of everyday life. It is not an alien invasion; it is a courtship. It trusts our imagination; it is not condescending. The rich man's silence leaves each one of us in that lonely place where we must answer out of our own soul.

May God give us the grace and the strength to lay up treasure in heaven, to see beyond this world, and be rich towards him.

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Catalog No. 928

Luke 12:35-48

Fourth Message

John Hanneman

July 25, 1993

## LEARNING TO BE WATCHFUL

*SERIES: PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM*

As a boy growing up in the Midwest I did a lot of hunting with my father. On brisk fall mornings we would tramp the fields and the corn rows together, seeking the elusive pheasant. At first I carried a BB gun. Next I got a little 4-10 single shot shotgun, and at last graduated to a 20-gauge with a three-shell clip. We kept our guns on safety as we walked the rows, glancing all around for the slightest movement. We practiced keeping our senses finely tuned. I worked at remaining focused by imagining that a bird was going to take flight at any second. My fingers were ready to instantly switch the gun from safety to fire. I trained myself to aim and shoot rapidly, but not too hastily lest I had not taken adequate time to aim or had not taken the proper precaution to make sure I was going to fire on a rooster and not a hen. No matter how many corn rows I walked, however, or how much I tried to be ready, the swish of a pheasant taking flight always startled me. Pheasants can huddle and hide in the smallest places. It's impossible to see them on the ground unless they are running. And when they take flight, the noise is so loud it almost scares you to death, especially if they get up from right under your feet. You try to stay alert and ready, but it is difficult.

Pheasant hunting demands that a skill called watchfulness be learned. My father was a master at this. As we drove down country roads looking for good places to hunt he would watch the ditches along the side of the road. How many times my heart began to pound as I watched him suddenly brake and heard him say, "Oh, oh! I think I just saw something." He had an uncanny ability to see a tiny pheasant head pop up out of the weeds. His hunter's watchfulness was amazing.

In this series on the parables of Jesus from the gospel of Luke we have joined with our Lord and the disciples as they wandered together through Samaria. Samaria, as we have already seen, was a place in between home and destination, a place that was not comfortable, but this was where Jesus chose to train the disciples about a way of being, about the Kingdom of God itself. His method was not his usual teaching or preaching, however. He spoke to them in parables, the language of the Holy Spirit.

One of the lessons he taught them concerned the spirituality of watchfulness, of readiness. This is a skill we sorely need to learn today. Just as a hunter must learn watchfulness and preparedness, so too Christians must learn to be watchful and ready. People are mired in minutia. Weighed down with anxieties, we tend to become perplexed by the confusion and disorder we see prevalent around us in our modern age. Our senses have become dulled, and as a result we cannot see, hear, or think properly. But we need to be watchful, ready for the coming of Christ, for the entrance of God into our daily routine. This is what we will learn today from Jesus' insightful words, uttered long ago in Samaria.

Our text is taken from Luke 12:35-48:

**"Be dressed in readiness, and keep your lamps alight. And be like men who are waiting for their master when he returns from**

the wedding feast, so that they may immediately open the door to him when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master shall find on the alert when he comes; truly I say to you, that he will gird himself to serve, and have them recline at table, and will come up and wait on them. Whether he comes in the second watch, or even in the third, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. And be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have allowed his house to be broken into. You too, be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect."

And Peter said, "Lord, are You addressing this parable to us, or to everyone else as well?" And the Lord said, "Who then is the faithful and sensible steward, whom his master will put in charge of his servants, to give them their rations at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes. Truly I say to you, that he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But if that slave says in his heart, 'My master will be a long time in coming,' and begins to beat the slaves, both men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk; the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him, and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and assign him a place with the unbelievers. And that slave who knew his master's will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, shall receive many lashes, but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few. And from everyone who has been given much shall much be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more." (Luke 12:35-48 NASB)

Technically speaking, this story is not really a parable, although Peter refers to it as such in verse 41. These verses actually form a cluster of parabolic allusions. While a parable usually is self-contained, here Jesus uttered three fragments of parables.

The first story concerns a landowner who returned from a wedding feast in the middle of the night. Arriving at his door he found it locked to keep out robbers, and his men waiting to open it for him. Jesus commented, "Blessed are those slaves whom the master shall find on the alert when he comes; truly I say to you, that he will gird himself to serve, and have them recline at table, and will come up and wait on them" (v. 37). I find the master's delight in the scene that greeted him understandable. Whenever my wife and I go out, I always make a point to first investigate the kitchen when we return home. Depending on whether the children have left it a mess or in immaculate condition, I respond with either delight or disapproval.

The second story speaks of a home that was burglarized. If the owner had known when the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and alert and thus wouldn't have been robbed and suffered loss. The story parallels the believer's being awake and alert to welcome the Son of Man (v. 40).

The third story concerns a steward who was left in charge, responsible for the care of others, during his master's absence. This is a commentary on a slave doing what he was supposed to do as opposed to a slave not doing his master's will. Verses 46-47 detail the disobedient slave's punishment, while verse 48 gives the principle behind the parable. The first story therefore is positive; the second story is negative; and the third story is both positive and negative.

Notice in all three stories the repeated themes of awaiting an arrival and the timing of the arrival. Someone was coming, someone was expected. The implication is that God was coming: the living Lord was about to make an entrance into someone's daily routine. As to the element of time, the arrival was unscheduled and unannounced. For the believer, discipleship has to do not so much with the past, but with the future, the next thing God is going to do. But this is invariably unpredictable, isn't it? Most of us aren't watching or ready for God to enter into our routines. Thus we are taken by surprise when he invades, just as the homeowner was taken by surprise by the robber.

Peter's question to the Lord comes between the second and third story fragments. His query, "Lord, are you addressing this parable to us, or to everyone else as well?" has the effect of raising the stakes. Every time Peter asks a question, our suspicions should be heightened. Here he was seeking to evade something. He was assuming, or he wanted to assume, that this parable was not directed at him. He wanted to sit this one out. But Jesus told Peter that he himself was responsible: watchfulness cannot be delegated. This warning does not concern a spiritual gift that one may or may not have; rather it applies to every Christian. Watchfulness and mindfulness imply readiness for spiritual invasion.

The theme of the second coming of Christ is obvious here, but the text isn't merely dealing with future things. It is dealing with the present, with the entrance of God into our lives right now. For two thousand years, the first coming was anticipated and announced. In Samaria, Jesus was now present in person, although many times earlier he had invaded people's lives. Many therefore entered into the reality before the actual event occurred because they were alert, watchful and ready.

The second coming, of course, is yet future. The new heavens and the new earth, the revelation of the sons of God, the kingdom of God in all its glory and fulfillment lie yet ahead. But there is what we could call a "present coming": the future, in a manner of speaking, is already here. We don't have to wait for heaven to get to heaven. Just as people were alert to the coming of God prior to our Lord's first coming, so we are to be alert to his unscheduled arrivals every day, in the midst of the mundane and the trite. The thing to be learned is, we won't recognize his second coming unless we are watchful and ready in the ordinary course of events.

How can we acquire this skill of watchfulness? I will list four things that I hope will be helpful in this regard. First, watchfulness must be practiced in the common, everyday circumstances. Notice that all three stories have to do with the workplace. They involve community and relationships. The characters themselves were servants and slaves. The stories have to do with the home; they take place around the daily activities—sleeping, eating, washing the dishes, the daily responsibilities. Jesus did not set his parables around weekend retreats in Mt. Hermon, around planned times for ministry or arranged celebrations. God certainly enters into such activities, but Jesus was talking about something much more basic and routine.

Watchfulness, said Jesus, is necessary in our daily work, in the ordinary affairs of life. He wants his followers to be watchful in these settings too. When we are dressed up for an event, or when we are relaxed following the day, it is then we tend to anticipate that something "spiritual" may well happen. But life "happens" when we are in the midst of routine and daily grind. Furthermore, watchfulness does not take our energies away from daily life. It has to do with being alert during our daily routine. We might be thinking humdrum, but God is thinking glory.

When I worked as an engineer, most of my work weeks included at least one crisis: a fellow-worker out of sorts, a rumor about a change in management, etc. It was easy to be consumed with these things, to become emotional and fret about them. But I discovered something remarkable at work. In the midst of all the busyness and rumor, the hustle and bustle, the routine and the mundane, there were opportunities to experience God's arrival. I had opportunity to talk with a fellow-worker about his marriage problems, with someone who had read a Christian article I had left lying around, with someone who wanted prayer. When I began to recognize that God was knocking at the door at unexpected and unannounced times, then work became much more adventuresome.

This is what Jesus is talking about here—being watchful for some slight movement, becoming aware of an opportunity to speak a word of comfort. Through these things God comes to serve us and to encourage our own hearts.

There is a second thing here: Watchfulness is designed to take the place of worry in our lives. There is a striking contrast between anxiety (the subject of the previous text, verses 22-34) and watchfulness (35-48). Verses 22-34 deal about rest and trust. Jesus counseled his disciples to not be anxious about life, what they would eat or drink, or the body, what they should put on, etc. But lest we be tempted to sit back and relax, verse 35 comes as a jarring surprise: "be dressed in readiness and keep your lamps alight," said Jesus. Girding the loins in readiness and keeping lamps alight certainly contrast a life of ease and trust.

Verse 35 would have conjured up several OT images in the minds of the disciples. To be "dressed in readiness" literally means to gird the loins in preparation for action or activity. An interesting reference to this command is given in Exodus concerning the eating of the Passover lamb: "Now you shall eat it in this manner with your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it in haste—it is the Lord's Passover" (Exod 12:11). Israel was to eat the Passover dressed in readiness, prepared to move out, because they were going to a new land. There was no time to be settled, no time to gather possessions or get comfortable, because their focus was on a future glory.

Likewise, the burning lamp would recall to the disciples the words of Leviticus 24: "Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 'Command the sons of Israel that they bring to you clear oil from beaten olives for the light, to make a lamp burn continually. Outside the veil of testimony in the tent of meeting, Aaron shall keep it in order from evening to morning before the Lord continually; it shall be a perpetual statute throughout your generations'" (Lev 24:1-4). They feared the darkness, but the presence of a burning lamp would symbolize abundant life, joy and peace. Extinguishing the lamp pictured death, utter gloom and desolation. The oil of the lamp, which represented the Spirit of God, was to burn continuously, i.e. symbolizing their need to be constantly Spirit-filled. The lamp of the wicked would

go out because it lacked the true life-giving illumination of God; it lacked the Spirit of God.

Worry enters when we tie ourselves to this life. It attacks when we begin building in the kingdom of earth, when we try to live comfortably in the flesh, when we want to remain in Egypt. Watchfulness and readiness, on the other hand, are tied to looking forward to a new kingdom, when our lives are illuminated by the Spirit of God. Freedom from anxiety does not mean we can be passive. We are still enjoined to be active and watchful, ready to respond when called upon—but we are to be ready for the right things.

Anxiety is a spiritual virus that drains and inhibits us. It can look like watchfulness, but when we are anxious we are merely thinking about ourselves. Anxiety narrows our perceptions to puny concerns. It can be clothed in spiritual garments, but it is the enemy of spirituality and watchfulness. Likewise, stress can appear as an intense concern about our spiritual and moral condition. It can pass as virtue, but it is only another guise for selfishness. We worry because we are overly concerned about the things of this life, forgetting about the kingdom of God. We can relate to the *Peanuts* cartoon character, Charlie Brown. Once Charlie came to see Lucy the psychiatrist. He confessed, “I had to go to the school nurse yesterday because my stomach hurt.” Lucy clucked, “You worry too much, Charlie Brown...No wonder your stomach hurts...You’ve got to stop all this silly worrying!” “How do I stop?” asked the worried patient. Lucy’s inevitably heartless response was, “That’s your worry! Five cents, please!”

But Jesus says we can cease worrying by becoming watchful. Watchfulness, therefore, is a very positive trait. We must be alert and looking for God, ready to advance towards the new kingdom, being illuminated by the Spirit of God, not living for this world alone but living, even today, in the world to come.

Anxiety seeks to take care of what God says he is already accomplishing. Watchfulness, however, is the state of being alert to what God is doing through a servant. Anxiety seeks to be like God, but watchfulness is being alert to what God is doing in our lives. Worry stems from being too involved in this world. Watchfulness comes from being involved in the kingdom that is already, but not yet. Both watchfulness and worry require the same energy, concentration and care, but their focus is very different. Worry gives way to wonder; anxiety gives way to admiration.

I confess I do my fair share of worrying. At times I think the term “worry wart” was specially coined to describe me. But I have found that when I am worrying, I miss God’s daily invasions into my life. I can’t recognize them because I am thinking about myself, my house, my children, my car, whatever. But here in this parable I learn that whenever I am tempted to worry about something, I should turn that energy into watchfulness.

The third thing we learn here is that watchfulness requires a servant’s heart and a healing of our senses. In the story it is the slaves and the steward who are watchful, not the homeowner and the master of the house. This indicates that watchfulness and servanthood somehow go together. Watchfulness is required of a servant who seeks to be responsible while the master is away. The watchful servant inquires of himself or herself what needs to be done, what care needs to be extended in the master’s absence, etc. If we view ourselves as people to be served, we are only watchful for what we can gain, but if we regard ourselves as servants, then we will be watchful for others. This

was what Jesus did, wasn’t it? He said he did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

And watchfulness has to do with how we use our senses, those faculties that make us aware of God and of others. In them he has provided us with the equipment we need for access to him. In the same way, spirituality is sensory. God gives sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, a touch that brings comfort and encouragement. David used the language of the senses in the Psalms: “My soul thirsts for Thee, my flesh yearns for Thee...I have beheld Thee in the sanctuary, to see Thy power and Thy glory...my lips will praise Thee...my soul is satisfied as with marrow and fatness, and my mouth offers praises with joyful lips” (Ps 63). Much of the Bible uses this type of language that speaks of our senses.

Having senses doesn’t mean we will use them, however. Animals don’t have this problem, but humans do. Our senses need to be healed so that we might become sensitive toward Jesus. This is accomplished through worship. In worship we recover our senses; we recover a vision of the beauty and glory of the Lord; we make the transition from acquisition to adoration. God has already provided a great deal in beauty and purpose. As we worship we discover that the true meaning of life is not based on what we own, but on what we give and what we perceive to be reality.

This is why we need prayer and quiet times in worship of God. But we fall short, don’t we? We are stressed out, so we seek pleasure. We are burned out, so we take time off. But we do these things merely to be revived physically and emotionally. While it is important that we take time off occasionally, these activities do not always involve our entire person. We get some rest, but then we rush back to the battle, energized and ready to acquire more of this world. We do not seek rest for the right reasons. What we are missing is spiritual healing, the healing of our senses that will make us aware, alert, and ready to the entrance of God into our everyday life, for the coming of his kingdom.

Wordsworth put this beautifully in his poem, *The World Is Too Much With Us*:

The world is too much with us late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers,  
Little we see in nature that is ours.  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon.

When we spend time in prayer, however, meditating on our beds in the night watches, our senses come alive. It is this that enables us to see, hear, taste and feel in the truest sense of these sensory gifts. Then we can arise in the morning, attentive to God’s entrance into our daily routine.

We need to be healed so that we can become watchful.

Finally, there is a blessing that is associated with being watchful and ready. This notion of blessing is repeated in the first and third stories; in fact, verses 37 and 43 are parallel: “How blessed is that slave who is alert when his master comes.” The blessing in the first story has to do with the homeowner’s delight in the servant’s faithfulness, so much so that he himself serves the servant. The blessing in the third story has to do with added responsibilities and care of possessions: to one who is given much, much is required.

In classical literature, the idea of blessing meant freedom from daily cares and worries. In fact, the Hebrew word for blessing, *ashre*, describes the sense of well-being that comes when we are living in harmony with creation and redemption. The psalmist wrote, “How

blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in His ways. When you shall eat of the fruit of your hands, you will be happy and it will be well with you” (Ps 128). Both the slave and the steward were blessed because they entered into the experience of an unexpected arrival. The slave was seeking to serve, but he discovered that when his master returned, he himself was blessed with the master’s presence. He was able to enter into fellowship, and was even served by his master. The alert steward was rewarded with added responsibility. Joy was both expressed and experienced.

In the same way, when we are ready and alert to the unexpected arrival of God, we enter into the experience of his kingdom. We have a sense of well-being, because we are in tune with the Creator. We are free from worry, because we are not focused on this age but on the age to come. We find that we are in fellowship with God, and he gives to us and serves us because he is delighted to find us alert. Thus we experience life and eternity. We are blessed as a result of being watchful and ready.

Some of our pastors were in Vancouver recently attending a conference. One evening, Pat Harrison, our Junior High pastor, alert and watchful, met a pastor who was all alone and Pat suggested we invite him to have dinner with us. Although we were looking forward to having time together to build fellowship and closeness as a staff, we agreed. We extended an invitation to this man, Glandion, to join us. At dinner, we discovered that he had grown up in the Bay Area. He had even gone to Peninsula Bible Church and had been discipled by a man who in turn had been discipled by Ray Stedman! I can hardly find words to describe how blessed we all were by this brother’s joining us for Christian fellowship.

Watchfulness as a way of being was Jesus’ subject in these three fragments of stories which he taught his disciples as they wandered together in Samaria, the in-between place. Watchfulness involves having a different perspective towards everyday life and looking for the entrance of the kingdom of God. It replaces worry and anxiety. It involves our senses that are healed by prayer and worship, and it results in tremendous blessing and joy.

Edwin Markham’s poem *How The Great Guest Came*, is a great favorite of mine. I would like to conclude this enjoinder to watchfulness by reading it for you.

#### How the Great Guest Came

Before the cathedral in grandeur rose  
 At Ingelburg where the Danube goes;  
 Before its forest of silver spires  
 Went airily up to the clouds and fires;  
 Before the oak had ready a beam,  
 While yet the arch was stone and dream—  
 There where the alter was later laid,  
 Conrad, the cobbler, plied his trade.  
 It happened one day at the year’s white end—  
 Two neighbors called on their old-time friend;  
 And they found the shop, so meager and mean,  
 Made gay with a hundred boughs of green.  
 Conrad was stitching with face ashine,  
 But suddenly stopped as he twitched a twine

“Old friends, good news! At dawn today,  
 As the cocks were scaring the night away,  
 The Lord appeared in a dream to me,  
 And said, ‘I am coming your Guest to be!’  
 So I’ve been busy with feet astir,  
 Strewing the floor with branches of fir.  
 The wall is washed and the shelf is shined,  
 And over the rafter the holly twined.  
 He comes today, and the table is spread  
 With milk and honey and wheaten bread.”

His friends went home; and his face grew still  
 As he watched for the shadow across the sill.  
 He lived all the moments o’er and o’er,  
 When the Lord should enter the lowly door—  
 The knock, the call, the latch pulled up,  
 The lighted face, the offered cup.  
 He would wash the feet where the spikes had been,  
 He would kiss the hands where the nails went in,  
 And then at the last would sit with Him  
 And break the bread as the day grew dim.

While the cobbler mused there passed his pane  
 A beggar drenched by the driving rain.  
 He called him in from the stony street  
 And gave him shoes for his bruised feet.  
 The beggar went and there came a crone,  
 Her face with wrinkles of sorrow sown.  
 A bundle of fagots bowed her back,  
 And she was spent with the wrench and rack.  
 He gave her his loaf and steadied her load  
 As she took her way on the weary road.  
 Then to his door came a little child,  
 Lost and afraid in the world so wild,  
 In the big dark world. Catching it up,  
 He gave it the milk in the waiting cup,  
 And led it home to its mother’s arms,  
 Out of the reach of the world’s alarms.

The day went down in the crimson west  
 And with it the hope of the blessed Guest,  
 And Conrad sighed as the world turned gray:  
 “Why is it, Lord, that your feet delay?  
 Did You forget that this was the day?”  
 Then soft in the silence a Voice he heard:  
 “Lift up your heart, for I kept my word.  
 Three times I came to your friendly door;  
 Three times my shadow was on your floor.  
 I was the beggar with bruised feet;  
 I was the woman you gave to eat;  
 I was the child on the homeless street!”

May God grant that we will be found watchful and ready when he knocks on our door today.

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Catalog No. 929

Luke 15:1-32

Fifth Message

John Hanneman

August 1, 1993

## ARE YOU LOST?

*SERIES: PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM*

One of my pet peeves is that I hate to lose anything. Losing things really gets to me. If I find that something is mislaid at home, I immediately drop whatever I'm doing and start searching for it. First, I ask my wife where it is. This upsets her because she thinks I'm blaming her. But of course, I would never blame her. An argument quickly ensues. Then I go on what would probably look to others like a wild and irrational search of the house. Every closet, even the attic, has to be searched. I usually end up asking my wife once more if she's seen it, and then a worse argument ensues. I cannot rest until I find whatever is lost.

Our last study in this series on the parables of Jesus from the gospel of Luke brings us to the subject of being lost. Here we discover that God does not like to lose things either. If we have a fetish for finding lost things, surprisingly, we share this characteristic with God. In these parables Jesus shares several stories that reveal God's character and his perspective in dealing with lost people.

Luke 15:

Now all the tax-gatherers and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. And both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

And He told them this parable, saying, "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

"Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!' In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

And He said, "A certain man had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' And he divided his wealth between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be in need. And he went and attached himself to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he was longing to fill his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my

father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! 'I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.'" And he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him, and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found. 'And they began to be merry. Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things might be. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' But he became angry, and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began entreating him. But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you, and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a kid, that I might be merry with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with harlots, you killed the fattened calf for him. ' And he said to him, 'My child, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. 'But we had to be merry and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.'" (Luke 15 NASB)

The context of this chapter is Jesus' receiving sinners and eating with them. In that first century culture, sharing a meal was equivalent to sharing life with one's guests. In the East today as in the past, a nobleman may feed any number of needy persons as a sign of his generosity, but he will not eat with them. When guests are "received," however, the one receiving them eats with them. In addition to eating with sinners, there is a possibility that Jesus was hosting them. This setting is combined here. The truth that Jesus gives is always context specific, and as we will see, the timing and placement of this parable is important.

Jesus' hospitality met with murmuring and grumbling on the part of the Scribes and Pharisees. The verb is present tense; they were doing it all the time. The word is used in Exodus 16:2 in the story of Israel's journey to Canaan. The Israelites ran into trouble and danger in this unmapped territory and they longed for the security of Egypt. To the Pharisees, being in the company of tax-gatherers and sinners in Samaria was like being in unmapped territory. They wanted the safety of religion and moral righteousness, and so they grumbled.

The parables of Jesus that follow, in verses 4-32, are a defense of his actions.

Actually there are four parables here, not three. They spiral in intensity: 100 sheep→10 coins→2 sons→1 son; and they are told in doublets of two and two. The parable of the lost sheep opens with a shock when we note that it was addressed to Pharisees. Throughout the Scriptures, a shepherd is considered a noble symbol. Moses was a shepherd. Ezekiel referred to kings as shepherds. Even God himself is described as a shepherd in Psalm 23. But by contrast, first century shepherds were considered unclean. For the Pharisee, a sinner was either an immoral person who did not keep the law or one who engaged in a proscribed activity, like herding sheep. Thus, any man who thought shepherds were unclean would naturally be offended if he were addressed as one.

The shepherd in the story was clearly negligent in his duties. He was probably a hired hand, or a less affluent member of the extended family. He counted the sheep in the wilderness, discovered that one was lost, and then left the flock there. A second shepherd, it is assumed, returned the sheep to the village.

The outcome of this story gave rise to two occasions for rejoicing. The first time was when the shepherd found the lost sheep. This is remarkable. A lost sheep will lie down and refuse to budge, so the shepherd had to carry it over a long distance. Surprisingly, this man rejoiced despite the trek that still lay before him. The second occasion for rejoicing occurred in the village when the shepherd returned with the sheep. The villagers rejoiced that the shepherd was safe, and they also rejoiced over the sheep, since the flock probably was owned by one or more of them. A lost sheep was a community loss, a found sheep an occasion for community joy.

The parable of the lost coin reinforces the parable of the lost sheep. The structure of the story is a bit simpler, but it has almost the same format. Here the theme of joy comes in the middle of the story. Since cash was a rare commodity, the lost coin was valuable to the woman. In those times women were very restricted in their movements, thus the coin may well have been lost in the house, not in the wilderness. Certainly it could be found if the searcher put forth the effort. And notice that Jesus used a woman as the main character in the story, thereby rejecting Pharisaic attitudes toward certain groups in society.

The story of the prodigal son, verses 11-32, is a double parable (like the story in 4-11), but there are many more details given in this parable compared with the first two. (A lost person gets more attention than a sheep or a coin.)

The younger son asked his father for his inheritance. Such a shocking demand would be unheard of. It would warrant a beating, since the request really was implying that the son wished his father were dead. In Middle Eastern literature, from ancient times to the present, there is no incidence of any son, old or young, asking for his inheritance from a father who was still in good health.

In his response, the father demonstrated great love for his son. He may not have had provision for his later years, yet he allowed his son to sell all that was coming to him while he himself was still living. The text says that the son left quickly. The speed with which he acted could well indicate the disapproval of the community for his actions. A family estate was very important; selling it off was no small matter. The older son went along with the arrangement. He did not protest the sale or try to reconcile his father and brother. His relationship with his father was not what it should have been. We can only imagine the anguish of the father's heart over this turn of events.

The younger son went to a foreign country and squandered all his inheritance in wild living. No one had any doubt that this included keeping company with prostitutes (v. 30). A lone Jew in a faraway country lacking money and friends would have been especially vulnerable in a time of famine. The young man was driven to desperation. He joined himself to a citizen (a reference to tax collectors perhaps). He fed pigs, an unthinkable task to a proud Jew. No one gave him anything in his time of need. The verb is imperfect: "no one was giving to him." Clearly he wasn't earning enough to keep him alive.

At last he came to his senses. He had left home to find his freedom, but instead had found servitude and bondage far worse than anything his father's hired men had to put up with. He came to a form of repentance in the foreign land. He still had a plan to escape his situation: he would be a hired servant. As such he would be a free man with his own income, living independently in the village. His social status would not be inferior to that of his father and brother. He could maintain his pride and independence. And he would be able to repay his father. He wanted to admit his failure, but he didn't feel useless. He knew his father could fashion him into a good workman.

When the prodigal son arrived home, he was welcomed by his father and by his father's servants in a remarkable way. He would not be just a servant, he would be a son. The father did not actively look for his son, as the characters in the parables of the sheep and the coin did, yet he was seeking him all the same, with passive energy. He probably had already decided how to respond if the youth returned. When the son finally appeared on the horizon, the father was filled with compassion. He gave him a robe, a ring, and shoes. There was a great celebration and they kill the fattened calf.

The fourth story has to do with the older son. Actually, the first three stories are told for the sake of the fourth. The older son was doubly lost: he was lost to both his father and brother. When he discovered the cause for the celebration, he became angry and refused to share in the rejoicing. He chose instead to humiliate his father publicly by quarreling with him while the guests were present—a very serious turn of events.

The conversation between son and father indicates that the older son was lost also. The younger son was estranged and rebellious while he was absent from the house, but the older son was estranged and rebellious in his heart while he was yet living in the house. The estrangement and rebellion of the younger son were evident in his surrender to his passions and in his request to leave his father's house. The estrangement and rebellion of the older son were evident in his anger and his refusal to enter the house. The older son did not address his father with honor. He claimed he had slaved for him, thereby demonstrating the spirit of a slave, not a son. He felt he had not disobeyed him, but this very notion was a sign of disobedience. He accused his father of favoritism. He said he was not part of the family and would like to be merry with his friends, the same desire expressed by the younger son. He also attacked his brother, referring to him as "this son of yours," not "my brother." The older son preferred to not have fellowship with his father than accept his parent's treatment of his brother.

In this he was acting like the Pharisees. They thought they had it all together. They were religiously secure, but they were not. They were angry because Jesus was eating with tax-gatherers and sinners, loving the unclean people who wanted to come home from a far country. But their pretense of having it altogether prevented them from experiencing the joy of being found. The Pharisees preferred

to not have fellowship with the Heavenly Father than accept Jesus' treatment of the prodigal brothers.

The story does not end at verse 32. The Pharisees would have discerned that the fourth story was work in progress. This worried them. They were grumbling, just like the older son, so they were left to finish the story for themselves.

We can recognize at least four themes in these stories. First, these parables demonstrate the nature of the Father's love. The character of the Father is likened in turn to that of the shepherd, the woman, and the father of the two sons. In each case something was lost. In the story of the two sons, both were lost, and to each the father demonstrated unconditional grace and love.

Notice the father's dramatic actions when the prodigal son returned home. He expressed great love for him, protected him from the hostility of the village, and thus restored him to fellowship in the community. The father "ran" to his wayward son. This was a humiliating act; a nobleman with long flowing robes would never run to anyone. The son had felt completely rejected in a foreign land, but he was utterly accepted by his father who kissed him again and again in a sign of reconciliation and forgiveness. He wanted him to have the best robe, most likely his own. We are reminded of the words of Isaiah, "For he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness." The ring probably was a signet ring, which meant that he was trusted in a remarkable way.

But then the father went beyond anything we might expect or imagine, for in his conversation with his older son we recognize that for the second time that day he demonstrated unexpected love. He went to him and entreated him. He did not judge, criticize or reject; he did not scold or rebuke. He poured out his love upon his older son because he wanted him to understand grace and to rejoice with him over the return of the prodigal. He assured him that his rights were fully protected, that he was not a servant, but an heir; he had given him everything.

The story demonstrates the fact that the Heavenly Father has a reckless, relentless, pursuing, searching, passionate love for lost children whom he wants to return home. He has an inexhaustible yearning for the misplaced. He drops everything and runs to us, even when we are angry, disappointed and selfish. He doesn't tell us what we have done wrong. He doesn't hold grudges, resenting us as we parents often do with our own children. He wants us so much he will go to any trouble to woo us back to him. The ultimate proof of this is that, as the apostle Paul says in Romans, Jesus died for us while we were yet sinners. He gave his life while we were still lost, while the outcome of our life was still uncertain. Amazing love! Amazing grace!

Last April, a group from our singles ministry traveled down to the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico to help roof a church in a remote Mayan village. For two days we worked there in a village so remote that a 7-kilometer road took 45 minutes to drive. Many of the people did not speak Spanish, only Mayan. There was not store in the village. Once when we wanted a soda to drink, we found that there were only seven cold sodas in the whole place. After we had finished work in the evening we planned to show the Jesus film that has been circulating all around the world. We sewed sheets together to make a screen, and the locals nailed our primitive screen to the side of the church. Everyone came out to see the movie: women and children up front, men standing around the sides, teenagers in the back. There was nothing else playing in town, no television, no movies, no distractions. I sat on a wall, watching a movie whose language I could not understand, yet I understood everything that was going

on. Here we are, I mused, 25 people taking a week out of their lives, spending a lot of money, yet it's worth every bit of it if one person finds Christ, or perhaps more accurately, if one lost soul is found. This is the nature of the Father's relentless love.

The second theme running through these parables has to do with sonship. The Father's desire is for us to repent, not that we might become slaves, but full-fledged sons and daughters. In the story, being found is equated with repentance. The older son thought he could save himself, but the prodigal son came to the place where he knew he was powerless to do this. The younger son was found, but the story ends with the jury still out on the older son, although the father went out and found both of them.

The love of the Father has purpose and desire—the purpose of being found, and his desire that we become true sons and daughters, not just slaves living in the house. The shoes given to the younger son signified his being a free man in the house, not a servant. And the fact that the servants put the shoes on his feet indicated that they accepted him as their master.

One son was restored from death and from servanthood. He was given a robe, a ring, and shoes. The other son insisted on remaining a servant. Although he lived in the house, he did not regard himself as a son. He thought of himself as a slave, although his father wanted him to be a son, too. The apostle Paul recalls this theme in these words from Galatians 4:1-7: "Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything... But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons... Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God."

This is one of the hardest things for Christians to really believe in their hearts. God doesn't want us to come in through the back door. He doesn't want us to think that since he has stooped down to save us, we have to live as second-class citizens. He doesn't want us to eat and sleep out back in the slave quarters. But we are like the prodigal, aren't we? We think we can no longer be sons so we are content to merely live in the house as slaves. While it is true that we do not deserve his grace and love, yet he embraces us fully and wants us to be his sons and daughters, living boldly and confidently in the house, with full access to him.

Joy is the third theme evident in these stories. Being found is an occasion for joy indescribable. Anytime we find something we thought was lost, we experience a great sense of joy, don't we? Following our trip to the Yucatan, I had hardly entered our house when my daughter came to me and asked, "Where is your copy of 'Old Jules'? I have to do a book report for school." I searched the book shelf, but it was not there. I was dead tired, but I immediately set about searching for that book. While rummaging through an old box of papers I found a photograph of my father, my two brothers and myself that I had been looking for for 15 years. I can't describe my joy in finding that photograph. If I can get that excited about a photograph that I found, and a shepherd can get excited about a sheep which he found, and a woman can get excited about finding a lost coin, imagine the joy of the Father over one sinner who repents and is found!

In these stories then the shepherd found his lost sheep, the woman found her lost coin, and the father found his lost son. In each case that which had been lost was found, and in each case there was celebration and rejoicing as a result. And the joy was expressed and experienced in community. In the case of the prodigal son, the selec-

tion of a calf rather than a sheep or goat meant that the entire village was invited to the great celebration.

The principle of joy is repeated in the first three stories: "I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (7); "In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (10); "Let us eat and be merry; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found" (24). The shepherd and the father considered the burden of restoration to be joy as well. Jesus had the same anticipation of joy, as the writer of Hebrews declares in 12:2: "who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

The father of the two wayward sons could do nothing other than rejoice and celebrate. This was his very nature, and this is God's nature, too. His heart aches over those who are lost and rejoices over those who are found. The conversion of a sinner, the finding of one who is lost, brings indescribable joy to him and the angels of heaven. This indeed is a cause for the community of faith to rejoice.

During a baptism service at our family camp weekend this year people shared their stories of how they had been found. One young woman took everyone by surprise by coming up front during the sharing to join her father and brother, was planning on being baptized. She began to cry, and then her father began to cry. Soon just about everyone there was in tears. She said, "Now is the time for me to express the fact that I have been found." As we went down to the lake, two or three others came forward spontaneously to be baptized. The joy on the faces of these people and the joy experienced in community was the highlight of the entire weekend. They had been found by the relentless God who would not give up on them.

Finally, these parables have a theme of decisions that must be made. All of us must recognize our condition of being lost, whether we are lost in the wilderness or in the house.

The parable of the prodigal son is really misnamed. A more fitting title would be the parable of the lost sons, or the parable of the father's love, for this story portrays two types of sinful men and illustrates the nature of their sin and its results. One son was lawless without the law, the other lawless within the law. Both rebelled, both broke their father's heart, and both ended up in a far country, one physically, the other spiritually, yet the father demonstrated the same unexpected love to each. For both, his love was critical if they were to become sons.

Are you lost? This is the question each of us has to answer at some point in our lives. Perhaps you are like the sheep in the wilderness. Maybe you are like the younger son. You have wandered far from home and you are lost. You sought freedom but you found enslavement. You are out of resources and no one is giving you anything. You want to go home. The good news for you is that Jesus says you can come home. You can never out-sin the grace of God. He accepts tax-gatherers and sinners. He searches relentlessly for lost sheep and lost children. He is waiting for you with arms outstretched, ready to kiss you again and again and clothe you with his best garments, the Lord Jesus himself, and join with you in feast and celebration. What you have to admit to yourself is, "I am lost. I want to come to Christ, to live in the house through the merits of his blood shed for me."

Or perhaps you are like the coin, like the older son. You are in the house, not the far country. You have always gone to church and have seemingly been an obedient son or daughter. But in your heart you are not. You are just as lost as the younger brother. Sometimes it is easier to see how lost we are and to confess it if we travel far from home and wreck our lives seeking independence and freedom. But if we are like the Pharisees and think we have done pretty well, then it is much more difficult to see our condition through our veil of religious and moral pride. We think we don't need to be found. We are angry with God's acceptance of prodigals, people who are unclean and who fail to live up to our standards. Paul was a prime example of this kind of attitude before he came to Christ. We become like this if we ever find ourselves tiring of the testimonies of wretches who have been saved by grace. Aren't there people like me, moral and upright, who come to Christ? we ask.

If you find yourself in this category of person, for you the story is unfinished. You have to fill in the last stanza yourself. What will you write? That you remained angry and refused to enter the house and celebrate with your brother? Or will you write that you agree you are lost, that you want forgiveness and sonship with the Father, and you will enter the house to celebrate both you and your brother being found?

We sang "Amazing Grace" earlier this morning. This hymn was written by John Newton, one of the great Christian preachers and hymn writers of the 19th century. John Newton's mother died when he was seven years old. With his father at sea, he was left largely on his own. As a young man he was conscripted into the British Navy, but he deserted and became a slave-trader in Africa. Betty Carlson, in her book *Your Life Is Worth Living*, says of John Newton, "he was a wreck of a man...he was a hard, rough, dirty sailor with a foul mouth and an appetite for rotten living. He hated life and life hated him." But somehow, a copy of *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis, was placed into his hands, and John Newton began the process of being found. For six years he struggled to find inner peace until finally he began to love life, and life began to love him. When he entered the ministry, he wanted people to know that he had a marvelous secret to share. He traveled all over England sharing this secret in his preaching. Toward the end of his life he insisted on preaching every Sunday even though he was nearly blind and needed an assistant to stand with him in the pulpit. One Sunday, during his sermon, he repeated the phrase, "Jesus is precious." His assistant whispered to him, "You've already said that twice." Newton replied, "Yes, I've said it twice, and I'm going to say it again." Then, with all the force he could muster, with a frail voice he cried out once more, "Jesus is precious!" John Newton knew the joy of being found.

Amazing grace! how sweet the sound—  
That saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost but now am found,  
Was blind but now I see.

One day in Samaria, under the watchful eyes of the disapproving Pharisees, Jesus was receiving tax gatherers and sinners. There can be no question that, just like those lost people whom Jesus sat down to eat with that day, everyone is lost. The only question remaining is whether we are willing to be found.

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Luke 7:36-50

Sixth Message

John Hanneman

January 2, 1994

# THE SWEET TASTE OF FORGIVENESS

*SERIES: PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM*

As we enter 1994 we return to a series of messages which we began last summer on the parables of Jesus from the gospel of Luke. We will immerse ourselves once more in these marvelous, mysterious texts which formed such a critical part of Jesus' teaching ministry to his disciples. Our text today is Luke 7:36-50, the parable of the two debtors.

I want to begin this morning by quoting from a 1960's song by Simon and Garfunkel. It is a rather short song but it is one that is long on sadness:

Time it was and what a time it was,  
It was...a time of innocence, a time of confidences.  
Long ago...it must be...I have a photograph,  
Preserve your memories, they're all that's left you.

The composers were remembering something that had been lost: an innocence, a passion, a hope. These lines reflect a wishing, a longing that life could begin again. Most of us have felt this longing resonating deep within our souls. If only we could turn back the clock and begin again. If only we could have one more chance. For many, this wish centers around forgiving others or being forgiven. Some must bear the pain of knowing they have inflicted harm on others; some have regrets over living outside of the will of God. They long to be able to go back and make things right, to start all over again.

If life were a computer game, this would be easy, wouldn't it? Taking a wrong turn, meeting a monster or facing defeat presents no lasting problems in computer games. All one has to do is erase the mistake, or hit the reset button, and begin again. But life doesn't work that way. "Long ago, it must be, I have a photograph." How sweet life would be if we could find forgiveness, start over again and do it right next time.

So we come to the parable of the two debtors. We have already learned that in the parables, Jesus used the language of the Holy Spirit both to train his disciples and to confront and expose Pharisaical ideas and self-righteous perceptions. In his parables, Jesus penetrates our defenses, bypasses our pre-conceived notions and confronts us with truth that forces us to think through issues. Most of the parables in the gospel of Luke occur in what has been called the Travel Narrative, chapters 9-19, which deal with the time when Jesus and the disciples were journeying from Galilee to Jerusalem. Our text this morning however, verses 36-50 of chapter 7, precedes this time. Here we will discover that there is indeed a way to begin again, there is a way to forgiveness and renewal. Jesus' words will show us what is required of us, and how sweet forgiveness can taste.

I will begin by reading the text; then I will make some observations on it; and finally, I will draw four spiritual implications from this story of the two debtors.

**Now one of the Pharisees was requesting Him to dine with him. And He entered the Pharisee's house, and reclined at the table. And behold, there was a woman in the city who was a sinner;**

and when she learned that He was reclining at the table in the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster vial of perfume, and standing behind Him at His feet, weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears, and kept wiping them with the hair of her head, and kissing His feet, and anointing them with the perfume. Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner."

And Jesus answered and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he replied, "Say it, Teacher." "A certain moneylender had two debtors: one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they were unable to repay, he graciously forgave them both. Which of them therefore will love him more?" Simon answered and said, "I suppose the one whom he forgave more." And He said to him, "You have judged correctly." And turning toward the woman, He said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has wet My feet with her tears, and wiped them with her hair. You gave Me no kiss; but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet. You did not anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with perfume. For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little." And He said to her, "Your sins have been forgiven." And those who were reclining at the table with Him began to say to themselves, "Who is this man who even forgives sins?" And He said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." (Luke 7:36-50 NASB)

This incident from the life of Jesus is made up of seven scenes relayed in inverted fashion. In other words, the passage moves in a stair-step fashion towards a center and then retreats back. Scenes one and seven balance, scenes two and six balance, and likewise scenes three and five. The parable, which is scene four, comes in the center of the text. This is bracketed by an exchange between Jesus and a Pharisee named Simon, and their exchange in turn is bracketed by the actions of a certain woman. Scene one is an introduction and scene seven is the conclusion.

The opening verses introduce the three major characters in this incident: the Pharisee, Jesus, and a "woman in the city who was a sinner." Jesus had accepted Simon's invitation to come to his home to dine with him. It is likely that Jesus had preached in the community, and afterwards he was invited by Simon to come to his home for a meal and to engage in debate. A religious society of that day, the *haberim*, held meals in common for the purpose of religious study. Often a visiting sage or teacher would be invited to participate, and debate would go on well into the night. This may have been the context of Simon's invitation to Jesus.

When the gospels speak of “reclining at table,” they are referring to a banquet, actually a public affair. A table and couches were set in the center of the room and people from the community assembled by the outer wall of the house, listening to the debate going on inside. The presence of the general public brought great honor to those reclining at the table.

The woman, referred to in the text as a “woman in the city who was a sinner,” probably was a prostitute. She entered either with Jesus or just before him. (Her dramatic actions began, according to Jesus, “from the time I came in.”) She probably had heard Jesus proclaim the freely offered love of God for sinners, and she had come to make a grateful response.

The cultural key to this story centers on the notion of hospitality. Visiting guests arriving for dinner would take off their shoes and leave them at the door, and servants would greet them by pouring water on their feet. If this courtesy were not followed, the implication was that the visitor was one of inferior rank. Guests reclined at table, their feet drawn up underneath and behind them, because of the offensive, unclean nature of feet in Oriental society.

The host would greet his guests with a kiss. Equals were kissed on the cheek. A student/disciple would kiss the rabbi’s hands; the servant his master’s hand; the son his parents’ hands. (Kissing the feet was the supreme act of devotion and honor.) The guest’s head would be anointed with olive oil, which was cheap and plentiful, and commonly used for this purpose.

Notice that Simon omitted all these three signs of hospitality and greeting with Jesus. Since he called Jesus “Rabbi,” the least he should have done was kiss his hands; but Simon, a judgmental host, callously failed to greet Jesus even with this minimum gesture. This was an unmistakable insult. In our culture it would be like opening the front door to someone’s knock and just standing mute at the door or walking away, leaving the door open. One would expect at minimum some sort of greeting: a word of welcome, an invitation to enter and sit down, an offer of something to drink or eat. But Jesus received no such greeting. Instead, Simon insulted him. He had shown his colors, and now everyone was waiting to see how Jesus would respond to the Pharisee’s calculated slight.

But notice how the woman, the “sinner,” greeted Jesus. In very dramatic fashion she does for him what Simon should have done. Seeing how Simon insulted Jesus, she responds by expressing her devotion to the Lord, forgetting that she was in the presence of a circle of men who were hostile to her also. She stands behind Jesus, by his feet, and she washes, kisses, and anoints them. (The first three verbs are participles: *bringing, standing, weeping*; the last three verbs are past tense: *wiped, kissed, anointed*.)

Approaching Jesus then, the woman begins to weep and to wet his feet with her tears. The washing of the feet was probably unintentional because she does not have a towel; instead she uses her hair to wipe them. A woman’s letting down her hair was an intimate, tender gesture, one that was to be done only in the presence of one’s husband. The Talmud indicates that a woman could be divorced by her husband for letting down her hair in the presence of another man. Furthermore, the rabbis considered uncovering the bosom and loosening the hair actions that fell into the same category. This woman’s letting down her hair in the presence of men was a shocking sight. The atmosphere in the home of the Pharisee must have been electric.

Then the woman began to kiss the feet of Jesus. She could not greet him with a kiss on the cheek (such an action would be hopelessly misunderstood), and so she kissed his feet. Literally, the text says, “she kissed them again and again.” Her action demonstrates great honor, respect and devotion. The third action of the woman was to anoint the feet of Jesus. She had come prepared with perfume which she carried in a flask around her neck. This was used both to sweeten her breath and perfume her body, doubtless an important element for a woman who probably was a prostitute. But now, having found forgiveness, she doesn’t need the perfume any longer, so she comes prepared to pour it on Jesus’ feet. For her to anoint his head would be unthinkable. Samuel, could anoint Saul and David on the head, but a sinful woman could not anoint a rabbi in that way. As a servant, however, she could anoint his feet and thereby show honor to his noble person.

Simon’s refusal to honor Jesus in the customary fashion indicated that he regarded his guest to be of inferior rank, but the woman’s actions bestowed on Jesus the honor of a nobleman in the house of a king.

Simon’s response to the actions of the woman reveals his purpose for inviting Jesus to his home: he wanted to test the claim that Jesus was a prophet. The Pharisee’s language is contemptuous; he refers to Jesus as “this.” The Greek word for “touching” can also mean “to light a fire.” It is used of sexual intercourse in Gen 20:6; Prov 6:29; 1 Cor 7:1. This was not intended here, but Simon’s use of this word in this context had clear sexual overtones. He implies that what the woman was doing was improper, and if Jesus knew what sort of person she was (which he would if he were truly a prophet), he would have nothing to do with her. Jesus responds by saying, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” This exact phrase was used in the Middle East to introduce a blunt speech that the listener might not necessarily want to hear.

The parable is the center of the story, just as in Luke 18:18-30. There, the moneylender extends the same grace to each of two debtors. Both were unable to pay, and in need of grace; the only difference was the amount of each man’s debt. The Aramaic word for debt and sin is the same. The comparison is to Simon and the woman. They are both sinners, they are both in debt, but one loves and the other does not; one sees the magnitude of the debt, the other does not. Jesus asks Simon a question: “Which of them therefore will love him more?” Simon realizes he is trapped. Lamely he tries to escape by saying, “I suppose the one whom he forgave more.”

Jesus’ next words are addressed to Simon, but he delivers them facing the woman. If he were facing Simon, we might expect his tone to be harsh, but as he speaks facing the woman, his words are filled with gentleness and gratitude. They are expressed to a daring woman in desperate need of forgiveness and grace. “Do you see this woman?” said Jesus. “I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has wet My feet with her tears, and wiped them with her hair. You gave Me no kiss; but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet. You did not anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with perfume.”

Jesus is pointing out in no uncertain terms Simon’s lack of hospitality. In any society, a guest is expected to show appreciation for the hospitality extended him no matter how meager it might be; no matter what was set before him, the guest would say again and again that he was unworthy of the hospitality extended to him. To attack the quality of hospitality offered, regardless of the circum-

stances, is unknown in fact or fiction, in personal experience or in traditional story. But Jesus attacks the quality of the hospitality of Simon's home.

Finally, Jesus forgives the woman. More accurately, he announces a forgiveness that has already taken place. Thus he acts in God's stead in the announcing of forgiveness and in the receiving of gratitude. The men in the room are at least puzzled, at worst offended. The faith of the woman has saved her, not her works.

Now we come to the spiritual principles in this story and parable. Here is the first one I see: *If we are to experience forgiveness, we need a true view of our sin and our need for God's grace.*

Simon completely misjudged what was happening on that evening. He labels sin in terms of the woman, referring to her as a "sinner" in verse 39, and thereby rejects the sincerity of her repentance. He claims that Jesus does not see the woman clearly, that he does not know her, but it is evident that Jesus does know her (v. 47). Her actions are not the defiling caresses of an impure woman, but the outpouring of love from a repentant heart. Jesus has not only read the woman's heart, he has read Simon's heart as well. He redefines sin and exposes Simon's unwillingness to acknowledge and confess his sin.

The story is a paradox. The great, unrepentant sinner is Simon, not the woman; the judge becomes the accused. The drama began with Jesus coming under scrutiny, but soon the tables are turned and Simon's sin is exposed. Simon has a problem: he cannot see his own sin clearly and thus his need for God's grace. He doesn't think he is in debt.

We suffer from the same distorted vision as Simon. Jesus once said that the eye is the lamp of the body. If the eye is clear or healthy, he said, if we see truly, with clear vision, then our whole body will be full of light. But if our eye is bad, then our whole body will be full of darkness.

Last week I set out with my children early in the morning for a ski trip. When we reached the valley, dense fog had settled in. It was so thick I could hardly read the exit signs. I crawled along, driving as carefully as I could as heavy trucks roared by. After an hour or so of these conditions, at last we reached the foothills. The fog began to dissipate. Suddenly, everything cleared up. The sky was blue; the gray hues gave way to brilliant colors. I thought to myself how often we are in a fog when it comes to our own sin and shortcomings, and how difficult it is for us to see these things and admit to them.

The story and the parable shatter our pharisaical notions about sin and sinners. Jesus came to Simon in the same way that Nathan came to David—to confront him and show him reality. It is easy to see sin in others, but hard to see it in ourselves. If we think we need but a little forgiveness, we are in big trouble. The amount of the debt is unimportant. Now matter how much someone else might owe, we are in a debit crisis ourselves. Jesus' advice to us is to take our eyes off of others and look to our own need for forgiveness. Our self-righteousness prevents us getting a true view of our own sin. Being critical of the weaknesses in others is a tell-tale sign of our own disease. John Owen said, "he who has slight thoughts of sin never has great thoughts of God."

I learned this the hard way just a couple of weeks ago. Christmas is always a time of busyness and frenetic activity, and this one was no exception. The week before the holiday, my wife told me that she was way behind schedule. She was in trouble, she said. But I

did not respond like Jesus. I acted like Simon. I became critical and judgmental of what I regarded as her shortcomings. Of course, I saw myself as one without debt; she was the problem. As I meditated on this text after Christmas, and after my wife rebuked me, I began to see my own sin. God showed me how ugly my own attitude had been. I was the one in need of God's grace, not my wife.

If we are to experience forgiveness, then we must be humble confessors, not proud blamers.

Here is the second principle I see in this story and parable: *God's love and his offer of grace is available to both the righteous and the unrighteous, to the religious and the non-religious.*

There are two words used for forgiveness in this text. The word in verse 42 comes from the word "grace." It means "to give cheerfully, freely." The idea is to make a gift. Here it means that the moneylender gave a gift of what the debtors owed and so forgave their debts. In other words, the lender forgave the debtors by assuming their debts himself. And this too is the wonderful good news of the gospel: God through Christ assumed our debt.

Jesus uses a different word for forgiveness in verse 48. This word means "to release, let go, cancel." Our sins are finally and completely canceled, totally obliterated by the work of Christ. Not a trace of them remains before a holy God. "As far as the east is from the west," says the Scripture, "so far has He removed our transgressions from us." Only God in Christ can do this.

There are two sinners in the story, Simon and the woman. Simon sins within the law, the woman without the law. The woman hears the message of forgiveness and she embraces the Son of God. Simon defines a prophet as one who avoids sinners. Jesus, the true prophet, gives himself in costly love and becomes the agent of God's forgiveness. Simon sees the woman as a sinner; Jesus sees her as a worshipper. Simon is embarrassed by her; Jesus lets her touch him.

But notice that Jesus offers God's grace to Simon as well. The fact that Jesus was a friend of sinners did not mean that he was unwilling to be a friend of the respectable and self-righteous. He is not afraid to challenge a room full of Pharisees; he is not put off by their scorn and contempt. He knows that Simon needs forgiveness just as much as the woman does. The issue, of course, is that everyone in debt; we all need to be forgiven. Forgiveness is not measured, it is not more or less; it is all or nothing. The only requirement is faith.

I remember the first time in my life when I experienced feelings of guilt and the need for forgiveness. I was probably about 8 years old. My brother had a pet rabbit, and my friend and I took it out of its cage. We stood on our picnic table outside and threw the rabbit high in the air and laughed as it landed on its feet. We enjoyed doing this so much we did it again and again. After awhile the rabbit didn't land quite so adroitly, and we put it back in its cage. Next morning I found it dead. I can still remember the horrible, sickening feeling I had. I would have done anything to rid myself of that feeling.

Have you ever felt that your sin was so terrible that God would never forgive you? Have you thought to yourself that your life could never be put right again? "Long ago, it must be, I have a photograph; preserve your memories, they're all that's left you." Jesus came to die for you, to forgive your debt. The woman in this story shows us that no debt is too great for God to forgive. Simon is an example to us that religious pride can stand in the way of receiving forgiveness.

When we are mired in sin, even when we despair of ever being able to make things right, we can still be too proud to throw our-

selves in total dependence on God. We may express to others our wish for a fresh start, yet we choose to stay entrenched in self-pity and despair because we refuse to give up control. But it doesn't have to be that way. Jesus hears the cries of guilt-ridden outcasts; he breaks down the walls of the arrogant and the respectable; and to both he offers grace and forgiveness. No matter who we are, no matter what we have done we can embrace him and taste the sweetness of his love. Here is how the psalmist put it: "As high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him" (Ps 103:11).

Here is the third principle I find in this text: *The result of experiencing forgiveness is a heart of love towards God, and acceptance of others.*

In the woman's dramatic actions, weeping, kissing and anointing, we see a heart filled with love and gratitude towards God. What we see in Simon's response, on the other hand, is a hard and unloving heart. The phrase, "for she loved much," is to be taken as the result of her being forgiven, not the reason for the forgiveness. We could take it to read, "her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, therefore she loved much." Hearing Jesus speak, the woman could scarcely believe her ears. Not in her wildest dreams could she imagine God accepting and forgiving her. As a result of tasting such sweet forgiveness, she comes to the dinner and responds towards Jesus with an outpouring of love.

But the contrary is also true: "he who is forgiven little, loves little." Simon has no real awareness of the nature of the evil in his life. He sees himself with few spiritual debts, and thus not in need of grace. This does not mean that his sins are few and therefore he needs only a little of God's grace; it means that he has many sins but that he has little awareness of them and has not repented. Consequently, having received little grace, he shows little if any love.

The implication is that there is a link between love and forgiveness. And there is. Forgiveness precedes love. Love is proportional to our grasp of the magnitude of our sin and the subsequent sweetness of tasting God's forgiveness. That was what caused love and gratitude to gush forth from the heart of this woman toward Jesus. That is what triggers genuine and costly acts of love, which are expressions of thanks for grace received, not attempts to gain more or a means to remove guilt. We do not love so as to find forgiveness or to remove guilt. We are forgiven, and this results in love of God. Whenever we see an outpouring of love from someone we can be sure that something has happened between that person and God.

This truth should prod us to do some self-evaluation. If we are having trouble loving, if we find we do not have a heart of gratitude, then perhaps we need to evaluate our experience of forgiveness. Have we been forgiven much? Love and thankfulness are prime indicators of our relationship with God. If the spring doesn't bubble, the problem may lie at the source.

Chuck Swindoll tells the story of going to a friend's house for dinner one evening. Over the fireplace was carved an inscription in German. When Chuck asked what it said, his host translated: "If your heart is cold, my fire cannot warm it." Doing good things cannot create in us a warm, loving heart. Only God can do this, and he does it only when we see ourselves for who we are and throw ourselves solely on his grace.

And finally, our last principle: *God even uses our sin to draw us into intimacy with him.*

How paradoxical! Simon works hard at avoiding any contact with sin, even with sinners. He imagines that any confession of sin or admission of guilt will destroy his relationship with God. But the exact opposite is true. The woman demonstrates that confession of sin results in forgiveness and intimacy with God. The very thing that Simon is seeking to avoid, the very thing he thinks will keep him from God is the very thing that God uses in the woman's life to bring about joy, intimacy and love—the things that Simon could never attain through religious performance.

Many of you are parents. How do you respond to your children when they come to you weak and struggling? Do you cast them out for failing? Do you reject them? Would you rather have a perfect child, or a child who struggles but clings to you?

Some time ago I met in the church parking lot a young man who is in a discipleship group with me. He was trembling, and he told me he needed to talk. He confided to me that he had relapsed into smoking dope. The tension of appearing to be something he was not was tearing him up inside. How do you think I responded? Did I cast him out of the city and refuse to talk to him? Hardly. I told him that in a way I had expected this to happen. We prayed, and I asked him to share it with our discipleship group at our next meeting. When he did he found acceptance, support and prayer, not rejection. God used this area of sin to bring a greater sweetness and genuineness to his faith.

God can use what seems ugly to us to deepen our experience of his compassion and loyal-love. This could never be Simon's experience, however. In his eyes he had done nothing wrong.

This story has been retold time and time again. It is told whenever someone embraces God's grace and tastes the sweetness of forgiveness. If we learn from the actions of this woman, this "woman in the city who was a sinner," then we will not have to sing that sad song of long-ago memories. Rather, we can live in the present, with a freshness, hope, and acceptance that will cause our hearts to overflow with gratitude and praise toward God. Then Jesus will say to us, as he said to the woman in the home of the Pharisee, "Your sins have been forgiven. Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

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Luke 14:1-24

Seventh Message

John Hanneman

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# GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER

*SERIES: PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM*

At Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's we like to extend hospitality in our homes, and we look forward to receiving invitations to visit the homes of family and friends. There is one essential ingredient to these festive occasions. No, it's not money; it's food. We love to gather around a table and share food together. Picture the scene: Mother is frazzled; the children are bickering; and father is watching football games on television while the meat burns. Once the confusion ends, however, and everyone settles in at the table, wonderful times of sharing life and friendships usually are the order of the day. I remember one such occasion in my parents' home, although I don't remember being invited. Lying in bed one night as a little boy I heard the sound of people talking and dishes clattering in the living room. I got up to see what was going on and discovered that my parents had invited a number of people over for the evening, and everyone was eating. My mother handed me a plateful of ham, scalloped potatoes and creamed corn. I thought I was in heaven. Ever since, creamed corn has been a favorite of mine.

Many of the important exchanges in life occur around a meal. Food seems to be a good excuse for conversation. In fact, some of our most meaningful interactions take place over good meals. When we want to talk over something with someone, we don't pick a street corner and talk there; we meet at a restaurant, a more natural setting for conversation and exchange.

The fact that so many important conversations take place over meals underlines the importance of hospitality. Perhaps there may well be something deeply spiritual involved. In the gospels we find that much of Jesus' teaching and many of his most intimate conversations took place, not in synagogues, but in homes, during meals. This is true of the setting for our study this morning in the parables of Jesus from the gospel of Luke. Our parable comes from chapter 14 of this gospel. The opening six verses set the context.

**And it came about when He went into the house of one of the leaders of the Pharisees on the Sabbath to eat bread, that they were watching Him closely. And there, in front of Him was a certain man suffering from dropsy. And Jesus answered and spoke to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?" But they kept silent. And He took hold of him, and healed him, and sent him away. And He said to them, "Which one of you shall have a son or an ox fall into a well, and will not immediately pull him out on a Sabbath day?" And they could make no reply to this. (Luke 14:1-6 NASB)**

This meal, shared in the home of a Pharisee, is not the kind of occasion we have been referring to, however. It is anything but a friendly, relaxed supper shared by good friends. The text says, "they [the Pharisees] were *watching* Him closely." "Watching" in this context means "to watch with envy, jealousy, evil intent." The same word is used in Acts of those who were "watching" Saul to kill him; it is used in Luke 6:7 when Jesus healed the man with the withered hand. But the tense atmosphere doesn't faze Jesus in the least. He ups the

ante by healing the man with dropsy. The home, the setting for hospitality, suddenly becomes inhospitable. The dining table, the most natural setting for hospitality, becomes a battleground.

Jesus addresses the watching Pharisees in three parables. He directs the first to the guests, the second to the host. The third parable speaks of that great day when God will host a banquet. It leaves the hearers guessing who is coming to dinner. All three stories are built around the figure of a meal, and all have much to say about hospitality.

In the first parable we learn the proper behavior for an invited guest at a wedding feast. Verse 7:

**And He began speaking a parable to the invited guests when He noticed how they had been picking out the places of honor at the table; saying to them, "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him, and he who invited you both shall come and say to you, 'Give place to this man,' and then in disgrace you proceed to occupy the last place. But when you are invited, go and recline at the last place, so that when the one who has invited you comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will have honor in the sight of all who are at the table with you. For everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, and he who humbles himself shall be exalted." (14:7-11)**

This first parable skewers the pride of the best and the brightest, the social climbers. Guests at the wedding feast were ranked in importance by their proximity to the host. But the guests in this story were themselves determining where they would sit. The host had to ask them to move when someone more distinguished arrived.

There is nothing profound about this story. What we have here is everyday, commonplace truth. This story catches us in the act, as it were. Perhaps we can illustrate. Have you ever overheard a conversation that went something like this?

"Betty, why did we have to sit next to the Thompsons? We always sit next to them. Can you believe how Martha went on and on about her sick cat? Then all Joe could talk about was his son going to Yale. Did you see how much fun they were having at the Jones' table? If you weren't late, we could have sat with them."

Jesus' first parable is keenly descriptive of what usually occurs at a social function. Everyone immediately wants to know where they are seated and who is sitting next to them. There is much jockeying for the positions of honor. Why do we do this? It is because we are thinking only of ourselves. We want to be part of the "in" group. We are seeking honor, importance, identity.

But Jesus brushes all that aside by saying, "everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, and he who humbles himself shall be exalted." The principle is obvious: we should not treat social occasions and the hospitality of others as a pathway to honor and importance.

Rather, we should concentrate our efforts on serving others by humbly take the least important seat. If God wants us to move to a more honored place, let him make the call.

I confess this used to be a distraction for me. I liked to check out the scene at social events and see where I was sitting. In recent years, however, I have determined that whenever I'm in a room full of people, I will take whatever place is available and talk with one person, rather than working the room, trying to connect with the most important people. Now I wince at how frustrating these occasions used to be when I was conscious of making the right connections. But I have marveled at what wonderful conversations the Lord gives me in these settings when I walk humbly as a guest.

Jesus' second parable has a word on how to be a host. Verses 12-14:

**And He also went on to say to the one who had invited Him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and repayment come to you. But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." (14:12-14)**

This parable questions the motives of the host. Again, this is ordinary truth; it needs little comment. In this instance, hospitality is seen as little more than social insurance. It is not used for building relationships and enhancing community. People are entertained so they will become indebted to the host.

This kind of hospitality can be likened to frequent flyer mileage: inviting certain people guarantees return invitations. Failure to be invited in return makes the host angry and resentful. A typical conversation between the hosts on such an occasion might go like this:

"Fred, can you believe the Petersons have not had us over to dinner yet? We've had them over three times in a row. I think we should drop them. Let's have the Singletons over next weekend. They always have a big New Year's Eve party; maybe they'll invite us this year."

When you invite people to your home, do you offer your hospitality freely, or are you merely angling for a return invitation? Jesus says we should not use hospitality as a means of controlling others or insuring ourselves social status by putting them in our debt. If we invite only our friends, they have the means to repay us, but there is no reward for this. Hospitality should be directed towards serving the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind—the outcasts who do not have the means to repay. Jesus says it is better to be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

My wife and I do not do very well when we entertain formally. Things just don't seem to work well for us. Her gift is spontaneity, and whenever she exercises her gift, whether it is gathering people in informal settings in our home, on our front yard or at the pizza parlor, wonderful times of fellowship and sharing result. One year we lived in Lincoln, Nebraska, and after I crashed and burned in law school we began inviting people from church to dinner on Friday nights at a restaurant called Chesterfield, Bottomly, and Pot's. It was an open invitation; anyone could come. After awhile we had 15 or 20 people coming. One night we got a call from a couple who hosted our home fellowship, asking if they could join us. They were the Bob and Grace Bunce of that church; they were always opening their

home for hospitality. We asked them to come and we had a wonderful time together. No one was worried about repaying anybody. Most of us as poor students didn't have the means to repay. We were gathering and enjoying life because of our common belief in Christ.

The highlight of our recent Christmas festivities was having a young boy who is a friend of my son, stay with us for the weekend. His mother died when she was 32, and this high schooler has no home. What joy it gave us to extend hospitality to someone in need. He was so excited about coming he wanted to come a day earlier than planned. My wife was so pleased by his staying with us that our own children became jealous of all the attention he got!

Jesus' third parable gives God's perspective on hospitality and what our motives should be when we practice it. Verses 15-24:

**And when one of those who were reclining at the table with Him heard this, he said to Him, "Blessed is everyone who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!" But He said to him, "A certain man was giving a big dinner, and he invited many; and at the dinner hour he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first one said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land and I need to go out and look at it; please consider me excused.' And another one said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please consider me excused.' And another one said, 'I have married a wife, and for that reason I cannot come.' And the slave came back and reported this to his master. Then the head of the household became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the city and bring in here the poor and crippled and blind and lame.' And the slave said, 'Master, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.' And the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the highways and along the hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste of my dinner.'" (14:15-24)**

This third parable responds to the comment in verse 15, "Blessed is everyone who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!" The person who spoke up would quickly be alienated from his friends at the table. This parable is rather more complicated than the first two. The "big dinner" refers to a banquet. There are two invitations to the original guests at the beginning of the parable, and two invitations (although these are different) to outsiders complete the story. A double invitation was traditional in the Middle East. The host decided on the amount of meat to provide based on the number of invitees who accepted his invitation. The appropriate animal was then selected and killed; it had to be eaten that night. The host completed the preparations, and at the hour of the banquet he sent a servant to tell the guests that the dinner was ready. The guests who accepted were duty-bound to appear. But in the parable, the guests begin to make excuses for non-attendance. How insulting to the host! A last-minute refusal to attend a great banquet is bad taste in any culture, but in the Middle East it is considered an affront.

Even a passing glance at the text reveals that the excuses offered are ludicrous. The first man says he has bought a field and needs to look at it. This is silly. In the Middle East, no one would buy a field without first checking every square foot of it, the location of the spring, etc. A Western equivalent would be to cancel a dinner engagement by offering the excuse, "I have just bought a new house over the phone and I must go and have a look at it and check

the neighborhood.” The first man is saying that this field which he claimed to have just bought was more important to him than his relationship with the host.

The second man excuses himself by saying that he has bought five yoke of oxen and he must test them. This is ludicrous. In that part of the world, oxen were sold in one of two ways. Either they were sold in the marketplace, where prospective buyers would test them to see if they pulled together (if they would not, they were worthless), or the seller informed the community that he would be plowing with the oxen on a given day and prospective buyers could observe them working together. This would take place before one would begin to negotiate a price. Here the guest is inferring that oxen were more important to him than his relationship to the host.

The third man offers the excuse that he has married a bride. This too is ridiculous. A wedding could not have been held on that day because no village could host two grand occasions on the same day. Further, Middle Eastern men practiced great restraint with respect to their wives; they would not discuss them in a formal setting. This man said he would attend, but now he makes the excuse he is too busy. He does not even ask to be excused.

Although these excuses anger the host, he responds with grace, not vengeance. He begins to invite the outcasts of the city. The original guests think that the banquet can proceed without them, but they are wrong. A second invitation is given to the outsiders, those beyond the community; they are invited so the house can be filled to capacity.

The symbols of the banquet are extremely important. The host, undoubtedly, is God. The dinner is the Messianic banquet that will usher in the New Age (Luke 13:28-34; Isa 25:6-9; Matt 22:2-10, Rev 19:9; Ps 23:5). It is described as a wonderful event, a time when every tear will be wiped away. It might be stretching things to say this, but the servant could very well be Jesus. The original guests were the spiritual leaders of Israel who rightfully were the first ones to receive an invitation. The lame and poor were outcasts within the house of Israel. Notice that this task is completed in the parable. Finally, the guests from the highways are the Gentiles. As the parable ends, notice that this task is not yet completed.

God sent his Servant to summon Israel to his banquet, but the Jewish leaders gave flippant excuses for not attending. So guess who's coming to dinner. The invitation goes to the outcasts in the Jewish community. Finally, the servant summons and compels the Gentiles from beyond the community. The gospel message is for the Jew first and also the Greek. God's banquet table will be complete. Jesus tells the Pharisees that none of the original guests who were invited would taste his banquet. No doggie bags will be provided. You cannot participate from a distance. You either accept the invitation or you do not come at all. The Pharisees thought they were hosting Jesus, but it turned out that God was making an invitation to host them. But they refused his offer.

Now we come to the spiritual application of the parable. The most prominent word in the passage is the word “call” (*kaleo* in Greek). It is used 11 times in verses 1-24, sometimes in compound form. The word for church is *ekklesia*, a favorite word of Paul, meaning, “called out ones, called of God.” The implication is obvious: God is calling, he is inviting, summoning, even compelling us to come to his banquet table. He doesn't coerce, manipulate or propagandize. But he isn't shy or passive either. Christ has come. The hour is here. Through his Servant, God is announcing a Messianic banquet par excellence,

a seven-course meal served with the finest wines. At this wedding feast every tear is wiped away, every sadness fades; no one is crying in their beer. Joy is on everyone's face. But, because Jesus eats with sinners and heals on the Sabbath, the Pharisees cannot share this joy.

If we are worried about occupying the seats of honor and entertaining the right people, Jesus says we are at the wrong party. When we use hospitality for personal gain, we miss God's banquet. We can even be in the right house, but we will be sitting at the wrong table.

There are several implications for us. First, people refuse God's invitation by making stupid, insulting excuses that are not credible. They say things like, “I can't become a Christian because I have to do my laundry”; or, “I'm invited to a party this weekend. Maybe next week.” They are forever finding something to do in order to avoid God's call. We, too, can be like the Pharisees. We make religious excuses to avoid an invitation from God. Do we really want Jesus more than anything else in life, or is he reserved just for Sundays? In order to accept God's gift we must reject many other things. His kingdom and his invitation demand our exclusive loyalty and wholehearted devotion.

Second, God in his grace extends his invitation to the outcasts and the Gentiles. He is not worried about repayment. He even compels people to come so that they will know his invitation is genuine.

Third, God is not limited by people's failure to accept his invitation. If those who receive the first invitations do not come, there will be others who will come. God's house will be full.

Fourth, attendance is by invitation only. But there is the notion of self-imposed judgment inherent in this parable. Those who by their own choice reject God's invitation disqualify themselves from table fellowship. We must enter in. We can't have portions sent out to us while we busy ourselves with other matters.

One commentator put it this way:

The two essential points in His teaching are that no man can enter the Kingdom without the invitation of God, and that no man can remain outside it but by his own deliberate choice. Man cannot save himself; but he can damn himself...He [Jesus] sees the deepest tragedy of human life, not in the many wrong and foolish things that men do, or the many good and wise things that they fail to accomplish, but in their rejection of God's greatest gifts (T. W. Manson, *Sayings*).

What have you done with your invitation? Have you filed it away in your “in basket.” Have you delayed making a decision feeling that something better might come up? Have you made a silly excuse for refusing God's hospitality?

If you have not sent in your RSVP, then God is inviting you this morning. I have your invitation right here. It says,

God the Father invites you to the grand and glorious marriage of his Son and the Church. January 9, 1994.

That's today. “Come to the table,” God calls. The door is open. Your place is ready. He has reserved it for you. The food is delectable; the wine is mature. There is joy beyond compare. Your part is to believe in Jesus, believe that Christ is the Son of God, and that he died on the cross for your sin. Ask for forgiveness now and accept him as you Savior and Lord.

Listen to the words of John as he describes the great marriage supper in Revelation 19:7-10:

“Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready.” And it was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. And he said to me, “Write, ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.’” And he said to me, “These are true words of God.” And I fell at his feet to worship him. (Rev 19:7-10)

Jesus, the very thought of Thee,  
 With sweetness fills my breast;  
 But sweeter far Thy face to see,  
 And in Thy presence rest.  
 Nor voice can sing, nor heart can frame,  
 Nor can the memory find,  
 A sweeter sound than Thy blest name,  
 O Savior of mankind.

If you want to learn about hospitality, then come with us to the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico in April. We have been going there every year since 1987 and I am always amazed at the gracious hospitality of those people who don't have one-twentieth of what we have. One year we were in the little village of Uci. Our work was done, and we decided to have an evangelistic outreach to bring our ministry to a close. We would meet for a baseball game and share the gospel afterwards. A couple in the local church, the Priscilla and Aquila of that fellowship, came up with the idea of having a party after that. Following the baseball game a crowd of two or three hundred people gathered and I shared the gospel story. One of our men shared his testimony. He invited a young boy to join him as he spoke. He told the crowd how much this young boy, a new friend, meant to him, and he shared about his friendship with Jesus.

Then we invited the whole village to the banquet at the home of this couple. The streets were lined with people as we walked to their house. I felt I was in first century Israel, walking with Jesus and the disciples. It was a festive, joyful occasion. Someone had brought a pinata for the children. To this day I do not know how everyone was fed. It was a magical time, God-orchestrated and Spirit-led. I compared it to eating at God's banquet table, a glimpse of what lies ahead.

Hospitality restores us to generosity and grace. It can be risky. When you invite someone into your home, you are in a rather defenseless position. But this is what God did, isn't it? He became defenseless. He descended to earth, becoming like us in every way except in our sin, to save us.

Hospitality, then, is a wonderful way to advance the kingdom of God. This is how God does it, and it should be how we do it. If hospitality is seen as anything else, a means to rise in importance, a way of insuring we are invited in return, then it's not hospitality. The model host is God, and we are invited to his great banquet. Hopefully, we haven't made other plans. As we assemble and invite others into our homes let us take our cue from God himself. When we are invited into social settings, and as we entertain others, let us do so with pure hearts, seeking to further God's Messianic age, rather than striving for honor to minister to our own foolish pride.

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Catalog No. 932

Luke 16:1-8

Eighth Message

John Hanneman

January 16, 1994

# CRISIS MANAGEMENT

*SERIES: PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM*

All of us at times face unplanned and unscheduled circumstances, situations that call for cool heads and wise and quick thinking. In this series on the parables of Jesus from the gospel of Luke, today we come to the story of a man who faced a crisis situation. Let us see what we can learn from his response.

Luke 16:1-8:

Now He was also saying to the disciples, “There was a certain rich man who had a steward, and this steward was reported to him as squandering his possessions. And He called him and said to him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward.’ And the steward said to himself, ‘What shall I do, since my master is taking the stewardship away from me? I am not strong enough to dig; I am ashamed to beg. I know what I shall do, so that when I am removed from the stewardship, they will receive me into their homes.’ And he summoned each one of his master’s debtors, and he began saying to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ And he said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ And he said to him, ‘Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’ Then he said to another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ And he said, ‘A hundred measures of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and write eighty.’ And his master praised the unrighteous steward because he had acted shrewdly; for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light.” (Luke 16:1-8 NASB)

What a strange story! You are probably asking, what has crisis management to do with the kingdom of God? This story is probably the least favorite of Jesus’ parables. No one in his right mind would attempt to teach it. But there is deep truth in this text which will be very profitable for us if we learn it.

Let’s begin by making some observations. The disciples, who are being trained by Jesus, are the main audience for this parable (v. 1), but the Pharisees are within earshot, for they, too, were “listening to all these things” (v. 14). Everything in the parable would seem to indicate that the master is an upright man. The steward is called unjust; if the master were ignoble he would have been labeled as such, and acted in a much different manner. The master is concerned about the squandering of his wealth, so the steward is dismissed. But that is all. He is not scolded, punished or jailed.

The rich man is a landowner, a farmer, and the steward his estate manager with authority to carry out the business of the estate. It is evident from the large rents that are owed that the renters are well off. They agreed to pay a fixed amount of produce for the yearly rent. The amounts were not due until harvest, but they were owed from the day the agreement was signed. Notice that even after the bills are changed there is still no attempt made to collect even the reduced amounts. The steward no doubt was making extra money “under the table,” but these amounts were not reflected in the signed bills. He

was a salaried official; additionally, he was paid a specific fee by the renters for each contract signed.

The steward is summoned and questioned, and charges are brought. The implication is that the master has been hearing things about him, a sign that the landowner is respected and liked. The steward has been manipulating the system a little too much. His scheme probably worked something like this. He would summon a tradesman to make some repairs for an agreed sum; then he would have the tradesman bill for double the amount and they would share the extra charges. In the Middle East, it is said, there are two kinds of people: those who rob you a little and those who rob you a lot.

The master calls in the steward and asks, “What is this I hear about you?” He does not make any specific accusations against the man. He hopes to surprise him into talking and divulging information. The steward knows the master is trying to trick him into talking; crafty operator that he is, he remains silent.

The fact that he leaves without saying anything is amazing. The steward has a number of options to mount a defense for himself. He could claim that since he deals in money he would have made enemies; he could request a meeting with his accusers and hope to outwit them; he could point to the long history of labor that he and his family had given the master; he could blame others; say the money that was “wasted” was given in bribes; blame the master for not giving clear instructions, etc. The discussion surrounding the firing of an employee normally would last several days. But the fact that he remains silent implies his guilt. He admits that the master has discovered his system, and he expects to be judged for his disobedience. He knows that excuses won’t get him reinstated to his job. He is dismissed on the spot. He gets no second chance. If he did, he might embezzle more. The word “turn in” or “surrender” means he must surrender the books, not balance the accounts. The books would have been fixed anyway. Since the steward is fired and not jailed, the master is unusually merciful toward him. He no longer has authority, but his dismissal is not yet final, nor has it been made public. He still has room to maneuver.

But he has a problem. Since he has been dismissed for squandering his master’s property, no one would hire him. He needs to change his negative image. He is not strong enough to farm and is ashamed to beg. He plans to risk everything on the quality of mercy he has already received from his master. If he fails, he will certainly go to jail; if he succeeds, he will be a hero in the community.

He summons his master’s debtors to refinance their loans. (The servants of the master assume the steward still has authority; they go to get the renters.) The steward calls them one by one so they do not have opportunity to confer with one another. He has to act quickly before they find out. He does not greet them by calling them “Friend” or “Sir.” He merely says, “write quickly.” He does not want the master walking in on this new transaction he has dreamed up. He gives the renters their bills so that the papers reflect their handwrit-

ing. They do not know that he has been fired. If they did, they would be breaking faith with the master and he would no longer rent land to them. The debtors assumed that the reductions were authorized. This is key to the story. The amounts are reduced up to 50 percent, the value of which is roughly equivalent to 500 denarii in both cases. The fact that both reductions are almost identical indicates the haste of the steward's plan. He would quietly make it known that he had arranged for the reductions. The steward is therefore a double thief; he is dishonest twice.

The master would be aware that the local village had already started a great round of celebration in praise of him as a noble and generous man. He has two alternatives. He can go back to the debtors and tell them it was all a mistake. But if he does, the villagers' joy would turn to anger and he would be cursed for his stinginess. His other alternative is to keep silent and accept their praise. He is a generous man. He could have jailed the steward, but he did not. Generosity is a prime quality of a nobleman in the East.

Realizing how clever his dishonest steward has been, the master praises him. The steward knows his master is generous and merciful. He risks everything on this, and wins; he gets another job. Even though the truth will come out later, he will be viewed as a wise man because of his shrewdness. The quality that is praised is wisdom, shrewdness. The word "praise" conveys simple approval of what the steward has done.

What can we learn from this strange parable that will be spiritually profitable to us? I will suggest three things. Here is the first: *Just like the steward, when we are confronted with our guilt, we face a crisis.* This story is about crisis management.

We all face crises in our lives. They may arise in our marriages, with our children, over our property, in our jobs. But there is one crisis that every one of us has to face, and that is the crisis of the kingdom of God. Most of us don't deal with this until we come face to face with our sin and guilt. We are faced with a shocking revelation and we come up short. We are called to give an account. We are caught in the act, we must stand before someone who knows what we have done and we feel naked and vulnerable.

When God presents us with the knowledge of our sin we are left speechless and defenseless. We can't run and hide. We can't escape. In the crisis of the coming of the kingdom, our sin engulfs us. How can we resolve our guilt and find acceptance and approval from God? We cannot work for it; we don't want to beg for it. If we are left to ourselves, our situation is hopeless. Because of his evil, man is caught in the crisis of the coming of the kingdom.

A few years ago I found myself in a crisis on the high seas. I was part of a group that sailed out of Santa Cruz on a beautiful summer's day. Suddenly, the wind began blowing and the waves tossed the boat about. We couldn't sail back to shore because we hadn't hoisted the proper sail. We began to drift down the coast. Then I became seasick and I had to go down below. I couldn't offer any assistance to the crew. I was in a crisis situation. I felt helpless and useless. We could not dock until we sailed all the way to Moss Beach. This is the kind of crisis of the kingdom of God comes upon us—suddenly, without warning.

The crises we face in life help us learn something very important about God. And that is the second point: *Our only hope of salvation is to depend solely on the mercy of God.* The steward acted wisely and shrewdly. In his time of crisis he knew that the only source of salvation for him was the generosity, the mercy of his master. Because the

master was indeed generous and merciful, he chose to pay the full price for his steward's salvation. The solution was not based on the steward's good work, but on the character of the master.

One thing that makes this parable even more confusing is the placement of the chapter division. We are tempted to read the parable in the context of the following parable which also concerns money. While there are some similarities in these stories, this parable of the unrighteous steward has much more in common with the one that precedes it, the parable of the prodigal son. For instance, both the steward and the son betray a trust; neither the prodigal nor the steward offers excuses; the word "scattered" is applied to both; in the Syriac and Arabic versions, the word for the property wasted is identical in both stories; in Luke 15, a son throws himself on the mercy of his father; in Luke 16, a servant throws himself on the mercy of his master; both the steward and the prodigal are shown extraordinary mercy by their superiors; the steward is not jailed for changing the bills; the prodigal is not punished for having wasted the family's assets; there is a party for the son, there is praise for the steward.

But the parable of the prodigal son is the most popular parable, while the account of the unjust steward is the least popular. The problem we have with this parable is that it seems a dishonest man is given as an example to be followed. But the Middle Eastern peasant at the bottom of the economic ladder would find sheer delight in this story. Nothing would please him more than a tale in which a David slays a Goliath. The steward is criticized as "unrighteous" and called a "son of darkness." The Western reader is surprised that a dishonest man is portrayed as a hero, but the Eastern reader would be surprised that such a hero is criticized.

A study of the parables, however, reveals a surprising list of unsavory characters: an unjust steward, an unjust judge, the neighbor who does not want to be bothered at night, the man who pockets someone else's treasure by buying his field. In three out of these four parables, Jesus is using the rabbinical principle of "from the light to the heavy," which means, generally speaking, "how much more?" If the widow got what she wanted from the judge (18:1-9), how much more will we receive from God? If the man got bread in the night from his neighbor (11:5-7), how much more will we receive from God? If this dishonest steward solved his problem by relying on the mercy of his master to solve his crisis, how much more will God help us in our crises when we trust his mercy?

The story is telling us that man's only option is to entrust everything to the unfailing mercy of God. He will pay the price for our salvation. We don't have to be good before we get saved. We don't have to be moral to be saved. We don't need a clever defense to be saved. What we must do is throw ourselves totally on the mercy of our Master. That is the only thing that will help us in our crisis with the kingdom of God. What drains us emotionally and spiritually is trying to handle these things on our own.

In 1960, the wife of a condemned spy visited a certain Arab in Jerusalem to ask for advice on how to gain her husband's freedom. The man told her to wait outside the palace for the king's motorcade to form and throw herself in front of the king's car. He explicitly instructed her not to plead innocence, warning her, "You know he is guilty and so does the king. To offer excuses is to destroy all hope. Throw yourself on the mercy of the king!" The woman carried out his instructions. The Jordanian monarch knew full well how a noble king was expected to act. He released the spy.

A few years ago my wife and I faced a crisis when we bought a home. We had sold our own house but could not find a house on the

market that was suitable. Because of time constraints, we had to buy another house. No sooner had we done so than we realized we had made a terrible mistake. For several months we were mired in a deep depression. Then one day I met our realtor. I told him how unhappy we were and asked him to get in touch with me if he ever came across the kind of house we would like. He said he had already found one, but was timid about calling me. Within a week we had bought that house and sold our own. I don't know how everything worked out. It was a miracle. The one thing I did understand was the generosity of our Father. I had done everything I could think of but nothing had worked. I had reached the end of my abilities. All that was left for me to do was throw myself on the mercy of the Master. And God acted generously, based on his character, not mine.

We find this theme repeated over and over in the book of Psalms. There is no god like our God. He is our strength, our fortress, our refuge. "Though the enemy encamp around me," says the psalmist, "yet I can trust in him." Listen to these wonderfully comforting words from Psalm 91:

**"Because he has loved Me, therefore I will deliver him;  
I will set him securely on high, because he has known My  
name.  
He will call upon Me, and I will answer him;  
I will be with him in trouble;  
I will rescue him, and honor him.  
With a long life I will satisfy him,  
And let him behold My salvation." (Ps 91:14-16)**

In a time of crisis we must learn to throw ourselves on God's salvation.

In this parable, Jesus was appealing to a well-known aspect of Middle Eastern life. The story is not about the character of the steward, but about the character of God. At first, we are not very sympathetic to the steward. But it is not easy to find good moral examples in life, is it? The gospel doesn't present us with a moral system so that we can be better than others. It teaches us about grace, about God's invasion into the midst of our confusion. The gospel is the story of how God works with people like you and me and how he saves us. Like the steward, we need to be less concerned about our behavior and more concerned about the actions of God. We need to be wise like the steward and trust solely in the mercy of the Master for our salvation.

Here is my third exhortation: *We should be wise even as children of light.* The key word in our story is wisdom. This is why the parable about money which follows actually tracks better with the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Wisdom is a skill—a skill in living, a skill deployed in self-preservation. It carries with it the idea of cleverness, savvy, knowing how things work, being street smart; not cautious, not playing it safe, but being alert to opportunities. Wisdom means to act with foresight, to look to the future. It is illustrated by the wise man who built his house on the rock in anticipation of the coming storm. It is seen in the story of the five virgins who bought extra oil, anticipating future need.

In the text the children of light are criticized, thus the parable is not for the unconverted, but for the converted. Jesus addresses the disciples, telling them how a rascal steward dealt with his crisis. The steward knew what to do because he knew the character of the master. But the children of light do not act with such clarity and

decisiveness with respect to the crisis of the kingdom. They are exhorted to have the same wisdom in relation to God and his kingdom as the steward did in relation to the world. They should know how to manage their crises by throwing themselves utterly on the mercy of God. Wisdom means throwing ourselves upon God. Do we have as much wisdom in dealing with kingdom issues as we do with dealing with earthly crises?

I took my daughters skiing a couple of weeks ago. Less than three hours after we arrived on the slopes, Sara broke her collar bone. At the first aid station they asked me if I wanted her treated there or did I want to make some other arrangements. I telephoned our health insurance company to ask what procedure I should follow; then I called our clinic to get clearance in order for her to be treated right away. I knew that if I didn't do these things, I would face trouble later with red tape. I was wise. I knew how things worked.

We are shrewd and wise when it comes to understanding how the world works. We spend years trying to learn how the stock market works. We read magazines and go to seminars to learn how to become financially secure. We invest long hours planning our retirement. We understand how insurance works, how education works, and we understand, or at least try to understand, how politics work. This is not all wasted effort by any means. Even Donald Trump can be shrewd in relation to the world. But Jesus' word to the disciples is that they were not wise in how the kingdom of God worked. Unbelievers outpace disciples in their foresight, ingenuity and risk-taking.

I attended a Sunday School class in a church in Oregon a number of years ago. The woman who was teaching the class told a story about a child who asked her once the meaning of the word "reconciliation." A man raised his hand and asked, "What did you say to the child?" The woman made a few comments, but she never answered the question. It was because she wasn't wise. The man was facing a crisis of the kingdom of God, but she couldn't respond to his question.

Do you know how reconciliation with God comes about? Can you explain it to someone in crisis? Do you know about forgiveness? Do you know how sin works in your own life, the areas where you are most susceptible? Are you wise about walking in the Spirit? Have you taken time to understand the mystery of marriage? Have you taken as much time to learn of the character of God as you have in investigating your own family background? When a crisis strikes, do you know how God works and do you trust him enough to throw yourself solely upon him? This is what this parable is about — being wise as children of light as we face the crisis of the kingdom of God; being shrewd enough to know the character of our Master; and trusting enough to throw ourselves on his mercy, knowing that he has paid the full price of our salvation.

Imprudence is living indiscriminately, mindlessly, letting other people make decisions for us. Prudence is taking hold of God, not being paralyzed by pressure, being serious but not grim, choosing God instead of the world, salvation instead of waste. If we lose sight of God's priorities, we lose the cutting edge. If we keep sight of the character of God, then we are truly wise.

May God give us the grace to be wise, to fully understand his character, that we might throw ourselves completely on him, trusting in his mercy and grace.

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Catalog No. 933

Luke 18:9-14

Ninth Message

John Hanneman

January 23, 1994

# BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT

*SERIES: PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM*

The day came for the newly ordained minister to give his first sermon. He made a grand entrance into the church. He was adorned in an elegant robe with velvet lining; a handsome cross hung from his neck. He walked slowly down the center aisle, with his head high, haughty and stiff with pride. As he rose to the pulpit, his arms expanded like wings reaching to the heavens. It seemed that he intended to pluck the words of his sermon right from the lips of God. He proceeded to deliver a fire-and-brimstone sermon, citing chapter and verse as though he had committed the entire Bible to memory and had personal knowledge, not only of all that had happened in the universe, but also all that was to happen. He railed for over an hour providing all the answers and all the solutions to all the problems of every member of the congregation.

However, throughout his spirited sermon, there was no indication that the overflow congregation had heard a word he said. They all sat stone faced. In sharp contrast to this grand entrance, he descended from the pulpit, perspiration dripping from his face, his beautiful robe now formless, his gold cross and chain dangling in his limp hand. As he slowly made his exit down the center aisle, disheveled, exhausted, bowed and yes, humbled, an elderly lady tapped him softly on his leg with her cane and whispered quietly to him: "Son, if you had come in the way you are leaving, you would have been much better off."

We all work hard at exalting ourselves, whether in the church, in business or in the community. That's the way the world works. We surround ourselves with degrees and titles and things that make us look important. We do not work nearly as hard at becoming humble. One reason for that is that it is hard to find books that teach on humility. No one seems to place much value on humility. Praise and honor are given to people who win and advance in life, not to the humble.

But pride is extremely dangerous to the Christian. C.S. Lewis said of pride: "Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness and all that are mere fleabites by comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil. Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind."

Although humility is hard to put into practice in our Christian lives, however, it is a critical element of our walk of faith, as we will see in our study today. In the parables of Jesus from the gospel of Luke, we are learning how the Lord was working out a godly character with his disciples. In our text, the parable of the two men who went up to the temple to pray, pride and humility are contrasted. Luke 18:9:

**And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, 'God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this**

**tax-gatherer. 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted."** (Luke 18:9-14 NASB)

First, some observations on the text. This parable is part of a collection of Jesus' teachings on prayer. The introduction, which was probably written by the evangelist, indicates that the story is directed at those who insist on trusting in their own righteousness. The general subject is righteousness; the particular, self-righteousness. There are two characters in the story: the Pharisee, a precise observer of the law, is deeply religious and highly respected; the tax collector, a member of a hated, isolated and often corrupt group, is considered to be a traitor to the nation.

The context of the story is temple worship; and what is in view is public prayer, not private devotions, for both men go up to the temple at the same time. In the tax collector's reference to the notion of atonement, he probably is referring to the sacrificial offering which was made in the temple twice a day, every morning and evening. Apparently, private prayers were offered as a part of the corporate worship during the atonement ritual.

The Pharisee stands alone as he prays. He considers himself righteous and religiously superior. He "despises others." Tax collectors were considered unclean. If the Pharisee even brushed up against the tax collector, or any unclean worshipper, then he, too, would be unclean. So he stands apart.

The focus of temple prayer was two-fold: the offering of thanks and praise to God for all of his gifts, and the making of petitions for the needs of the worshiper. But notice that this Pharisee ignores both of these elements in his prayer. He does not thank God, but rather boasts of his own self-achieved righteousness; and he makes no requests. He opens his prayer by saying that he is "not like other people." Then he lists an unsavory group, and includes the tax gatherer. His list proceeds from bad to worse. "Swindlers" and "unjust" obviously refer to the tax collector. "Adulterer" is thrown in for good measure. This is the same description which the self-righteous older son applied to his brother in Luke 15:30. This term reveals nothing about the tax collector, but it says a lot about the mind-set of the speaker. The tax collector is not part of another category. The Pharisee selects a number of characteristics to apply to the tax collector who becomes, in effect, the illustration of his list.

The Pharisee then proceeds to boasts before God of his own righteousness: "I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get." Moses stipulated a once-yearly fast on the Day of Atonement (Lev 25:29; Num 39:7), but the Pharisees fasted once a week. This man goes beyond even this: he fasts twice a week. Tithes were levied on grain, wine and oil (Lev 27:30; Num 18:27; Deut 12:17; 14:13), but this man



tithes everything. He prides himself on his more than perfect observance of his religion. He boasts of having not only kept the law, but exceeding its demands (cf. Amos 4:4).

The tax collector is set in stark contrast to the self-righteous Pharisee. He, too, stands away from the crowd, but for a very different reason. He does not stand aloof, but “afar off.” He feels he is not worthy to stand with God’s people before the altar. He is “unwilling to lift his eyes to heaven.” The accepted posture for prayer was to cross the hands over the chest, with eyes downcast. But the tax gatherer beats on his breast. This is still done in the Middle East today to express extreme anguish or anger.

The remarkable feature of this particular gesture is that it is invariably practiced by women, not men. One man who had lived in the Middle East for 20 years reported that there is only one occasion when Middle Eastern men beat on their chests, and that is in remembrance of an Islamic figure. Women customarily beat on their breasts at funerals, but not men.

In biblical literature, this gesture is used but twice—here in this story, and in the account of the crucifixion in Luke 23:48. There we are told that “all the multitude” went home beating on their chests. It takes something of the magnitude of Golgotha to evoke this gesture of beating the breast by men in the Middle East. The tax gatherer beats on his chest because the heart was considered the source of all evil thoughts (Matt 15:19). Thus we see the depth of his remorse. It was if he were seeking to get at his heart and drive the evil from his body.

The tax collector prays for mercy, and he does so in a particular sense. The Greek word for “mercy,” which appears in Rom 3:25; Heb 9:5, and 1 John 2:2; 4:10, clearly refers to the atonement sacrifice. The tax collector yearns for the benefits of the atonement. He stands afar off, unwilling to be seen because he senses his unworthiness to stand with other participants. Yet he wants to stand with “the righteous.” He beats his chest and cries out, in effect, in repentance and hope: “O God! Let it be for me! Make an atonement for me, a sinner!” He is aware that he can do nothing for himself and so he prays that God will intervene on his behalf. He longs that the great atoning sacrifice might apply to him.

The story concludes with both men coming down, but the tax collector is the one who is justified in God’s sight. The sacrifice does not have an automatic effect on the believer irrespective of his spiritual state. It is the broken-hearted, those who trust in God’s atonement, who are made right with God.

The principle given is a well known wisdom statement about exaltation and humility which occurs six times in the parables of Luke (8:8; 12:21, 48; 16:8b; 18:8b; 19:26) and in various forms in a number of places in the NT (Matt 18:4; 23:12; Luke 14:11; 1 Pet 5:6). The word “exaltation” is used in its OT sense, to mean “deliver, redeem.” One commentator writes: “As God’s name alone is exalted...so He alone can elevate and exalt men...Exaltation means drawing close to God; the righteous man who is meek and humble may hope for this and claim it...all exaltation on man’s part is repudiated...Exaltation (redemption) is the act of God alone.”

Now we come to the spiritual principles of this parable of Jesus. First, we need to recognize that pride and self-righteousness distort our view of relationships. This has a three-fold effect. First, our view of God is distorted. We begin to trust in our own ability to be right-

teous. We applaud our own efforts, boasting that we go way beyond what is required. We think that our relationship with God depends on ourselves. We fail to thank him for his gifts to us. We feel we are capable of finding favor and grace from him because we act better than everyone else. We cannot see that external performance, no matter how good it is, only causes our hearts to grow more prideful and cold.

Second, our view of others is distorted. We compare ourselves to them and we feel superior, so we exalt ourselves. We treat others with contempt. In our eyes they are but rogues, swindlers and adulterers. We stand aloof from them. We are too good to rub shoulders with such low-life.

C. S. Lewis has a helpful word for us here:

Pride is essentially competitive—is competitive by its very nature—while the other vices are competitive only, so to speak, by accident. Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others...It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest.

And third, our view of ourselves is distorted: We become consumed with self. Notice the prayer of the Pharisee: “I am thankful that I am not like other people; I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.” This man had no appreciation of his true sinfulness. He was not praying to God, but worshipping at the shrine of self. Pride causes us to see ourselves as the center of the universe. We act in the way that Babylon is described in Isaiah 14:

**“But you say in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven;  
I will raise my throne above the stars of God,  
And I will sit on the mount of assembly  
In the recesses of the north.  
I will ascend above the heights of the clouds;  
I will make myself like the Most High.’” (Isa 14:13-14)**

Pride distorts our understanding of God and our relationship with him; and then it undermines all other relationships.

David Roper, who was a pastor at PBC for many years, lists some prideful signs:

Pride shows itself in subtle ways: insisting on recognition (our titles); wanting to be noticed, to be prominent and eminent; smarting when we’re not consulted or advised on a matter; dominating social situations, telling our tales rather than listening to others; resisting authority; getting angry and defensive when crossed or challenged; harboring a grudge; nursing a grievance; wallowing in self-pity; choosing our own kind rather than loving the lowly; wanting to be in the center rather than serving on the edge.

Julia Ward Howe, who wrote the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, moved in a circle of prominent men and women, among whom was Senator Charles Sumner. On one occasion, Mrs. Howe invited the senator to her home to meet actor Edwin Booth. Declining the invitation, Sumner wrote to Mrs. Howe, “The truth is, I have got beyond taking an interest in individuals.” Later that night, Mrs. Howe commented on this arrogant remark in her diary, “God Almighty has not gone so far.”

C. S. Lewis concurs in these words:

In God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know God as

that—and, therefore, know yourself as nothing in comparison—you do not know God at all. As long as you are proud, you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.

Self-righteousness and pride distort our vision of sinners, our appraisal of ourselves, and our perspective of God.

Here is the second principle: In contrast to prideful distortions, humility allows us to see our relationships clearly. This also has a three-fold effect. First, we have a clear view of ourselves. Just like the Pharisee, the tax-gatherer stands some distance away from the sacrifice, but for a completely different reason. He does not draw near because he feels unworthy. He knows he is a sinner, but the Pharisee sees himself as deserving of everything that he has. But if we are truly humble, we will see ourselves as undeserving of anything. We must honestly confess that we are sinners, remembering that God does not forgive excuses, only sins.

Second, humility helps us get a clearer view of others. It helps us put ourselves in our rightful place—below, not above, others. Notice that the tax collector does not even lift up his eyes. He takes no notice of others. This is not his concern or focus. He is not looking at other people, trying to exalt himself in relation to them. But the Pharisee scans the crowd even while he prays. A humble person does not compare himself with others. He does not use others as steps to ascend to self-exaltation.

And third, humility helps us get a clearer view of God. We need his salvation if we are to be saved. The sorrow and remorse of the tax collector is demonstrated by his beating on his chest; and his prayer reveals his clear understanding of God: “God, be merciful to me, the sinner.” He looks at the atonement sacrifice and longs to benefit from it. If we are truly humble we will see ourselves as sinners who are totally dependent on a merciful God. Even keeping of the law, attending Sunday services or any kind of religious exercises will not secure righteousness for us. We can offer nothing to earn God’s praise. If we are to be saved then God must do it all. We must look at the cross and humbly ask that God’s atoning sacrifice benefit us.

Here is another helpful word from C. S. Lewis for those who are tempted to think that religion makes them better than their peers:

Whenever we find that our religious life is making us feel that we are good—above all, that we are better than someone else—I think we may be sure that we are being acted on, not by God, but by the devil. The real test of being in the presence of God is that you either forget about yourself altogether or see yourself as a small, dirty object. It is better to forget about yourself altogether.

In the list that follows, David Roper lists some characteristics of humility:

taking the lowest place and littlest place; being content to be unknown and unnoticed; refusing to dominate meetings and social situations; being mostly silent; listening more and saying less and not insisting that we be seen and heard; choosing to sit and associate with the lonely and the lowly.

In the tax-collector we have a picture of true humility. Everything about him speaks of brokenness and repentance before God and his fellow-man.

Now our third spiritual principle: There are consequences to pride and self-righteousness; and, ironically, they are the opposite of what we seek to gain. In the story two men go up to the temple, and

the Pharisee is in the lead. When they come out from the temple, however, it is the tax-gatherer who is in the lead; he is the one who is justified rather than the Pharisee. If you exalt yourself you will be humbled. Not only will you have enemies among men, but you will have an enemy in God. He will not let you get away with it. James says, “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (Jas 4:6). If you seek to raise yourself high, then be assured that God will bring you low. If you seek to build a tower of Babel, he will destroy it. The proof of his power to bring down things was clearly seen in the Los Angeles earthquake last week. Humiliation is the costly consequence of pride. When we choose to be great, we forfeit God’s grace and we experience instead his wrath and opposition.

A good illustration of this is the Tonya Harding/Nancy Kerrigan story which is getting a lot of news coverage these days. Tonya Harding invested everything in her goal to win the ice skating gold medal. Whether she was involved in the attack on Nancy Kerrigan we do not know, but we do know that her bodyguard and perhaps her husband were involved. They wanted to eliminate the competition and exalt Tonya to a position of praise and wealth. But their efforts have had quite the opposite effect. They have brought Tonya more humiliation than praise, and they may have cost her the opportunity to win the gold medal and the riches that flow from that. Even if she wins it, sponsors might not endorse her. And what of her rival, Nancy Kerrigan? She has done nothing, yet she has been exalted.

Finally, the exhortation is to humble ourselves before God does, and wait for him to exalt us. Humility has its consequences, too. Peter puts it in these words, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you” (1 Pet 5:6).

How can we “humble ourselves”?

First, we need to realize just how proud we are. This is the first big step on the road to true humility. Being quiet, shy and reserved does not mean you are humble. If you think you are not conceited, you are very conceited indeed.

Second, we need to stand before God with our eyes downcast. We must learn that our salvation comes from his hand, not from anything we do or anything we have to offer. The key to finding the heart of God is humility and contrition.

Third, we need to stop comparing ourselves with others and competing with them. Let us instead take the lowest place and seek to exalt others. This is the measure of a man or woman.

Fourth, we need to draw near to Jesus and learn from him. He was “meek and humble of heart.” He was not concerned about protecting his place or his dignity. Here is how Samuel Gandy put it:

By meekness and defeat,  
He won the mead and crown.  
Trod all his foes beneath his feet,  
By being trodden down.

Finally, we must wait for God. He will exalt us in due time. Our struggle is with waiting and worrying about who will take care of us. But Peter says that we can “cast our anxiety upon Him, because He cares for us.”

I don’t have any personal illustrations about humility to share with you, so I will tell you a story about a Nebraska acquaintance of mine named Lenny. My parents lived in Omaha until the time of their death. Some time after I moved to California, Lenny moved to

a house just up the street from them. Lenny is what you might call a product of the Midwest. We don't see too many Lennys in our community here in Cupertino. He reminds me of Roseanne's husband Dan. Lenny is very overweight; his stomach rolls over his belt. What makes it stand out so much is the fact that he goes about without a shirt. Lenny is very outgoing. On summer evenings he walks around the neighborhood, a can of beer in hand, talking with the neighbors until dark. I went to high school with Lenny. He knows a lot about me, but I don't even remember him. It's embarrassing. Whenever I went home for a visit, Lenny would come down to chat. I would never know what to say to him. My mother would suggest, "You should go up and talk to Lenny." I'd pretend I didn't hear her. I'd do anything I could to avoid talking to Lenny. Every time I left Omaha, I'd pray to myself, "Oh, God, thank you for not making me like Lenny."

As my parents grew older, Lenny would come to the house and do odd jobs for them. These visits became more frequent after my father died in 1988. When I talked to my mother on the phone, she would tell me that Lenny had been over to fix something, the water-heater, a drain pipe, whatever needed fixing. Other times he'd trim the trees or mow the lawn. If she needed to move anything heavy, she'd call Lenny. When she went into the hospital with brain cancer two years ago, Lenny watched over the house because there was no one staying there. Each time I visited during her illness, Lenny would come down to talk. When I left, he'd say if there anything he could do, to just ask. If I needed a place to stay, I could stay with him. Lenny will never be chairman of the board. He will never live in a mansion with three new cars in the driveway. He will never be written up in *Who's Who*. But he's written in my book. After my mother died and I drove away from 6714 Ogden for the last time, my prayer had changed to: "Oh, God, would you make me, a sinner, more like Lenny?"

I want to close this morning by reading Edward Sill's poem, *The Fool's Prayer*. It captures beautifully the theme of our text:

The royal feast was done; the King  
Sought some new sport to banish care,  
And to his jester cried: "Sir Fool,  
Kneel now, and make for us a prayer!"

The jester doffed his cap and bells,  
And stood the mocking court before;  
They could not see the bitter smile  
Behind the painted grin he wore.

He bowed his head, and bent his knee  
Upon the monarch's silken stool;  
His pleading voice arose: "O Lord,  
Be merciful to me, a fool!"

"No pity, Lord, could change the heart  
From red with wrong to white as wool;  
The rod must heal the sin: but, Lord,  
Be merciful to me, a fool!"

"'Tis not by guilt the onward sweep  
Of truth and right, O Lord, we stay;  
'Tis by our follies that so long  
We hold the earth from heaven away.

"These clumsy feet, still in the mire,  
Go crushing blossoms without end;  
These hard, well-meaning hands we thrust  
Among the heart-strings of a friend.

"The ill-timed truth we might have kept—  
Who knows how sharp it pierced and stung?  
The word we had not sense to say—  
Who knows how grandly it had rung?"

"Our faults no tenderness should ask.  
The chastening stripes must cleanse them all;  
But for our blunders—oh, in shame  
Before the eyes of heaven we fall.

"Earth bears no balsam for mistakes:  
Men crown the knave, and scourge the tool  
That did his will, but Thou, O Lord,  
Be merciful to me, a fool!"

The room was hushed; in silence rose  
The King, and sought his gardens cool.  
And walked apart, and murmured low,  
"Be merciful to me, a fool!"

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

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Luke 18:18-30

Tenth Message

John Hanneman

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# THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

*SERIES: PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM*

The army of Alexander the Great was famous for its deep sense of loyalty to the great conqueror. Once, Alexander led his army to a strongly fortified, walled city. He demanded to see the king and issued terms of surrender. The king laughed. "Why should I surrender to you?" he said. "You can't do us any harm. We can endure any siege." Alexander demonstrated why surrender was the only option. Nearby, within sight of the city walls, was a sheer cliff. He ordered his men to line up in single file and march toward the precipice. The citizens of the city watched with horrified fascination as the column marched towards and over the edge of the cliff. Only after several men had plunged to their deaths did Alexander order the rest of the column to halt. He then called his troops back to his side and stood silently, facing the city. The effect on the citizens was stunning. Spellbound silence gave way to terror. They realized they had no walls thick enough and no resources extensive enough to defend themselves against the kind of loyalty and commitment they had just witnessed. Spontaneously, they rushed through the gates of the city and surrendered themselves to Alexander.

This story graphically illustrates the cost and the power of unstinting loyalty. It shocks us because we are not used to hearing about this kind of commitment. Society today places little value on allegiance and loyalty. The so-called self-fulfillment ethic seduces us into believing that there is no higher loyalty than that which we owe to ourselves. Self-centeredness eats away at commitment to marriage, family, friends, and God. But the Bible calls upon us to make difficult choices, to choose Christian priorities and renounce whatever it is, things or people, that interferes with these priorities.

The Word of God is the very foundation of the Christian life. The Bible reveals insights about God that help us understand things that would otherwise be mysteries, offering us hope, comfort and encouragement in the process. But not always. On occasion we come across texts that make us squirm; they make us uncomfortable and unsettled. The parable of Jesus to which we come this morning, the story of the rich young ruler from the gospel of Luke, is just such a text.

Luke 18:18-30:

And a certain ruler questioned Him, saying, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments, 'Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.'" And he said, "All these things I have kept from my youth." And when Jesus heard this, He said to him, "One thing you still lack; sell all that you possess, and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." But when he had heard these things, he became very sad; for he was extremely rich. And Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a

needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." And they who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?" But He said, "The things impossible with men are possible with God." And Peter said, "Behold, we have left our own homes, and followed You." And He said to them, "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who shall not receive many times as much at this time and in the age to come, eternal life." (Luke 18:18-30 NASB)

Let's begin by making some observations. First, notice that this parable is placed between two incidents that have related themes. In 18:17, Jesus said "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it at all"; while in 18:43, Bartimaeus, the blind man, having received his sight, glorifies God and begins to follow Jesus. These then are the themes that bracket the parable of the rich ruler.

This young man approaches Jesus and asks a question. Interestingly, it is the same question as the one asked in Luke 10:25, the text that precedes the parable of the Good Samaritan. The only difference is the word "good." Clearly, the rich ruler wants to achieve eternal life through his own efforts. He is asking about the requirements for admission to the kingdom. The emphasis is on "self" and "doing." He wants to ensure his reward or inheritance through his own performance.

Initially, Jesus responds by opening up a discussion on the word "good." Perhaps he is saying that the rich ruler is using a term that is appropriate only for God, and therefore he is calling him God; perhaps he is telling the ruler that he is overdoing things a little. Then Jesus proceeds to answer the man's question, quoting five commands from the Decalogue. These are not quoted in their original order. Jesus' rearrangement of them places special emphasis on loyalty to family and attitudes toward property. Family is listed first and last, while property comes in the middle. The man responds by saying that he has done all of the things commanded.

Jesus then tells him that he lacks one thing. He wants him to sell all his possessions and follow him. His demand touches on the heart of the commandments, namely, family and property. The family estate, a symbol of the cohesiveness of the extended family, is of supreme value in Middle Eastern society. The young man is being asked to place loyalty to Jesus higher than loyalty to his family and his family estate, for in a very real sense these are one and the same.

He finds this to be devastating. Jesus could have said to him, "Just make sure that God is first in your life," but he doesn't. By asking him to sell his property, Jesus exposes his heart. The rich ruler wants to have both worlds—the kingdom of earth now and the kingdom of heaven later. An impossible demand is placed upon him. He hangs his head and grieves, not merely because he loves wealth, but also because he has just been made painfully aware that he cannot earn his way into God's graces. His self-confidence is shattered. His

ability to perform and accomplish no longer applies. Eternal life is beyond his grasp.

Jesus responds with a statement and then a parabolic story. The three notions “how hard,” “wealthy,” and “kingdom of God” bring verses 24-25 together in the center of the account. “How hard” corresponds to “easier,” “wealthy” corresponds to “rich man,” and “to enter the kingdom of God” is repeated twice.

Jesus’ comment, “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God,” is outrageous. Some truth can be conveyed only by humor. The largest animal in Mesopotamia was the elephant; the largest animal in Palestine was the camel.

Now the bystanders speak up. If the ruler found the demands of Jesus too hard, so too did they. They ask, “Then who can be saved?” If a rich man who is capable of doing much good cannot earn eternal life and secure his future, then what hope is there for ordinary people? Jesus responds, “What is impossible with men is possible with God.” There is a way, one that does not depend on human effort.

Then the question of the new obedience is raised. The crowd may well be wondering, “Has anyone ever done this?” Peter’s statement affirms the possibility: “Behold, we have left our own homes, and followed You.” The phrase, “we have left our own homes,” could refer to both people and property. Obedience is possible through the miracle of God’s grace.

Jesus now returns to the commandments. Again he emphasizes property and family; and compares the old and new requirements. In the old obedience, the faithful were told not to steal another’s property; in the new, one’s own property may have to be left behind. In the old obedience, one was told to leave his neighbor’s wife alone; in the new, the disciple may be required to leave his own wife alone. In the old obedience, the faithful were to honor father and mother. Popularly understood, this meant (and still does today) that children are to remain at home and take care of their parents until they die and are buried. In the new obedience, the disciple may have to leave his parents in response to a higher loyalty.

The words of Jesus would have shocked his hearers. To the Middle Easterner, family and home are considered more important than life itself. Jesus is making a higher, an impossible demand. This is why he introduces his words with the phrase, “Truly I say to you.” This phrase occurs only six times in the gospel of Luke, and each time it introduces a saying of awesome proportions. Jesus is not demanding that people dissolve their marriages and break family ties. What he is saying is that there is a new arrangement of loyalty: Giving honor and priority to God comes before marriage, brothers, race and relatives.

Jesus’ closing remarks return to the themes of eternal life and rewards. He gives a word of assurance. The one who obeys him and abandons other loyalties to follow him will not be left out. He will receive rewards in the present and eternal life for the future.

Now I want to offer for our consideration three principles from this text.

Here is the first one: *Salvation is beyond human reach; it is possible only with God.* The rich ruler is seeking to guarantee himself a place in heaven—to save himself a seat, in effect. What strikes me about this man is that he typifies everything we would aspire to be. He is not a rogue or a scoundrel. On the contrary, we would regard him as a positive example for our children. He is living a good, moral,

successful life. He is honest, ethical, committed to his family and respected in the community. The problem is, he imagines that all of these good character traits are building up a retirement account for him in eternity. He thinks that he is capable of achieving eternal life; that eternal life is a matter of “doing,” of works. Jesus places one last demand on him, and both he and the crowd are thrown into bewilderment. Heaven is not gained by human effort. People protest, “Surely those who are good and honest and moral will go to heaven, won’t they?” But to this, Jesus would reply, “No. Not if that is what they are depending on to get there.”

Salvation is a work of God. It is outrageous, laughable, to think that we deserve and can earn eternal life. The story reveals that we are helpless. We need a Savior. Eternal life is a gift, not an earned right. No one enters the kingdom of God unaided. No one achieves great things and inherits eternal life. No one has rights in the kingdom, not even rich men with all their potential for good works.

Wealth, possessions and ego can be major obstacles in this respect. If we think we have something to offer; if we are striving to be godly without God; if we try to save ourselves from despair, unfairness, injustice, frustration and hell itself in order to gain eternal life, then we are not savable. It is only when we come to the place where we recognize and confess that it is impossible for us to save ourselves that we become savable; for it is only then that we will cast ourselves upon God. Jesus said, “The things impossible with men are possible with God.”

Our penchant for trying to save ourselves is well illustrated by how men respond when they are trying to find someplace. Commonly, a man who is lost and trying to find his way will rarely ask for help. He will try to figure things out on his own, preferring to spend 45 minutes looking rather than asking directions. It is the same with salvation. We find it hard to admit that we are lost and we need the help of another.

This is how I behaved in my own spiritual journey. Looking back, I can see now how desperately I was trying to save myself. It was hard for me to admit I couldn’t do it on my own. I kept thinking that if I could take care of this or that area of my life, then I would be all right. I wouldn’t have called it salvation back then, but just the same I was trying to save myself from despair and meaninglessness. In other words, I was trying to find eternal life. But I was trying to satisfy my eternal longings through my own efforts. I failed miserably. It wasn’t until I gave up trying that God could save me.

The older I get, the more clearly I see this principle still at work in my life. I recognize my weaknesses, my foibles, and I have to acknowledge that I have not dramatically improved upon these in my own strength. All my best efforts still cannot breathe God’s Spirit into my heart. I cannot manufacture eternal life. I haven’t been able to accomplish my desires through my efforts in the first forty years of my life. What then drives me to think that I will be able to get there in the next 10, 20 or 30 years? Salvation, eternal life, is possible only with God.

Here is the second principle: *Discipleship is costly; it demands a renunciation of previous loyalties.* Jesus’ statement about selling and following points up the real reason behind the rich ruler’s desire to earn his way to heaven: The man does not want to give his whole heart to God right away. He thinks eternal life is some future state. He has wealth in this life and he wants to enjoy it. If he can earn his way to heaven, there will still be time in his schedule for living for himself. He wants the best of both worlds.

The story does not end with salvation; it goes on to talk about costly discipleship. Jesus says, "Follow Me." In the story, following Jesus is integrally related to being saved, entering the kingdom, and receiving eternal life. There is not a Plan A (you are a Christian) and a Plan B (you are a disciple). Becoming a Christian demands becoming a disciple of Jesus. It means renouncing former loyalties. Christianity is a new arrangement of priorities that builds on the old and surpasses it.

Jesus' demands seem harsh, even rude. They produce conflict and tension. The listening crowd is uncomfortable with the negative that seems to be at the heart of the gospel. They were being drawn to Jesus by his wisdom, love, and kindness, but now he is turning them away one by one. The obstacle that stands in the way of salvation is the same one that stands in the way of our following Jesus and entering into eternal life in the present: it grieves and saddens us to give up on the world.

This parable of the young ruler hearkens back to the words of Jesus in 9:57-62:

**And as they were going along the road, someone said to Him, "I will follow You wherever You go." And Jesus said to him, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." And He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, "Permit me first to go and bury my father." But He said to him, "Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God." And another also said, "I will follow You, Lord; but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home." But Jesus said to him, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."**

These verses set out three different responses to Jesus' command to men to follow him. One man is worried about safety and a place to sleep; another wants to bury his father; another wants to say good-bye to those at home. "Follow Me," Jesus commands. But our immediate concerns are taking care of ourselves, family and home. Jesus speaks a harsh word: You may not have a place to sleep; let the dead bury their own dead; you are not fit for the kingdom of God. But his seeming harshness gets our attention at a fundamental level, forcing us rethink everything. He is not saying that we should never speak to our family again; rather, he is saying that there are new priorities.

This is difficult truth to hear, isn't it? It is hard to think about renouncing, giving up this world. The past few days have been tough for me. Between certain disappointments and not feeling well, I have had a difficult week. Thinking about this passage didn't help. Why did I have to teach this passage? I asked myself. I could lay this truth on heavy, but I know that most of you are a lot better off in this regard than I am. I have to be honest and tell you what this text is saying to me. I can say all kinds of things about following Jesus, going on a ministry trip to Mexico, giving up my free time to study and teach the Bible, etc., but I want the world to love me, too. I want things to work for me. I want financial security. I want the best education for my children. I'd like to have a retirement plan. I love buying clothes at Nordstrom. I drool when I think about having a 4-wheel drive vehicle. I fantasize about moving somewhere and building my own house. I want Nebraska to win a national championship. To be honest, I want everything the world can offer, or at least what I think it can offer. I want to be at home here for a bit and then, after I have enjoyed this life, turn in my tokens and claim eternal life.

The parables of Jesus have a way of shattering our comfort zone. If we think we can rearrange our schedules, reformulate our priorities and then bring Jesus into the equation, we have missed the point. He is not talking about sprinkling our lives with God the way we sprinkle spices on our food. He is talking about a whole new kingdom. He isn't suggesting that we follow him to Africa, although that might be involved. He isn't telling us to sell everything, although that might be involved. He is asking us first and foremost to follow him into the kingdom of God. Let go of this world, he asks. Walk with him through the wardrobe closet into Narnia.

In Galatians, Paul says we have been delivered from this present evil age; we have been crucified to the world and the world has been crucified to us; we are separated from it. We don't become Christians so that we can be free to enjoy this world. We become free to enter into eternity, another kingdom, the new heavens, another dimension, the invisible, not the visible.

Jesus says two things about this life of discipleship. First, we have to sell before we can follow. We have to let go of this world, to let go of the hope of finding a home and finding comfort here. This is often our problem. We are trying to build two homes at the same time. We want to get squared away first, then, we promise ourselves, we will follow Jesus completely. But the sequence is important. We must give up before we get back. We may not be financially independent yet, we may not have met that perfect marriage partner, but we have to take a step of faith. We must let go, give up, renounce our loyalties and not look back. Paul Winslow, who was a pastor here for some years, said that once he took the pink slip of a car that he owned and signed it over to God. He wanted to free himself from it, because in his heart he placed too much value on it. Selling means to yield ownership, to sign over the title of all our property and all our relationships to God.

If you were to ask Jesus today the same question that the young ruler asked him, what would he ask you to sell? What keeps you from following him with your whole heart and entering into his kingdom? Your comfort? Your family? Your home? When you hear him say, "Follow Me," do you grieve like the rich young ruler, or are you ready to follow him without looking back? These are uncomfortable questions. Jesus meant it to be that way. He said, "where your treasure is, there will be your heart also."

Secondly, none of this is possible with man; it is possible only with God. Jesus said that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for us to give up this world. The same truth that saves us permits us to renounce the world and follow him. Like the unjust steward in his crisis, we are to throw ourselves on the mercy and grace of our Father.

Peter is the source of encouragement in this passage. He and the other disciples stand as examples in the text that we can leave behind other things and follow God. We are not alone in facing this difficult obedience. The men and women in every generation who have done this are our models. That is why it is helpful to read biographies of people like Hudson Taylor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mother Theresa and others. That is why it is helpful to hear from our missionaries, Rich Carlson, Rich Benson, Don Burgess and others. They encourage us to follow Christ; they help us to learn the cost of obedience. We know these people, and we know that they could not have done this on their own. We know, too, that the same grace that works in them is available to us.

Obedience is costly. Renunciation is painful. Yet this is the path of true discipleship.

The third principle in our text has to do with a promise: *Renunciation does not result in impoverishment*. The rich ruler came to Jesus with a question about eternal life. Despite his good efforts, he knew he still lacked something. The story closes with the promise of eternal life to those who follow. Jesus says that we will receive many times as much, not only in the future, but now, in the present. The result of renouncing, of dying to self, is paradoxical: We become free—free from our need for comfort, free from family manipulation, free from domestic routines. We receive rewards as gifts rather than acquisitions. We gain in the present much more than we give up—quite the opposite of what we expected. Life will not be without pain, conflict and difficulties, but Jesus says that no one who follows him will be left out; they will become rich instead.

Jim Foster, our missionary in Romania, in a recent letter describes the difficulties of living in that country. Changing money, building a house, learning the language, all of these things present enormous problems. Yet his letter is filled with joy. He writes of the joy of seeing Rich Carlson in Vienna; of sharing the gospel with people; of the work that God is doing in his marriage, etc. He says, “There is so much more that could be said; so many experiences, so many rejoicings, so many frustrations, so much to be thankful for. But I want you to know that I love it here in this crazy place. If I could slightly misquote Eric Liddell, I would say that I was made for Romania.”

My grandmother wrote the following in her Bible: “If He is not first in your life, you do not know the first principles of joy. If He is first, He can make up for anything you have lost.” This was written by a woman who was abandoned by her husband and had to raise her four children on her own.

One by one He took them from me  
All the things I valued most;  
’Til I was empty-handed,  
Every glittering toy was lost.

And I walked earth’s highways, grieving,  
In my rags and poverty.  
Until I heard His voice inviting,  
“Lift those empty hands to Me!”

Then I turned my hands toward heaven,  
And He filled them with a store  
Of His own transcendent riches,  
’Til they could contain no more.

And at last I comprehended  
With my stupid mind, and dull,  
That God cannot pour His riches  
Into hands already full.

The rich ruler was consumed with three things that could be summarized in the words: I, doing, and future. Renunciation, as harsh as it may seem, is the only path that allows Jesus to replace I; being to replace doing; and present to replace future.

Renunciation, said Emily Dickinson, is the “piercing virtue.” Jesus forces us, just as he forced the rich ruler, to choose our kingdom. Will we let go of the world? This is impossible for us, but, Jesus assures us, “the things impossible with men are possible with God.”

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Luke 19:11-27

Eleventh Message

John Hanneman

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# INVESTING IN THE RETURN

*SERIES: PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM*

When I was a boy growing up in Nebraska and Iowa, the Athletics baseball team was based in Kansas City, not in Oakland as it is today. On a couple of occasions we drove down to Kansas City to watch the New York Yankees play the Kansas City Athletics. I loved the Yankees. They were my favorite team. Mickey Mantle was my hero. If I still had all my Mickey Mantle baseball cards and those of the other Yankee greats, I would be a rich man today. One time when we went to a game, I was hoping to get Mantle's autograph so we arrived at the ball park early. An usher told me to stand with him by a certain gate. When he opened the gate, he said, I would be in right in Mantle's path to the field. I took my place by the gate. Autograph seekers lined both sides of the walkway, but I had the best spot.

At last the Yankee players began to come out of the locker room. One by one they walked by me: Tony Kubek, Bobby Richardson, Whitey Ford, Yogi Berra, Elston Howard, Cletus Boyer, Enos Slaughter. I was in heaven. My mother tried to get me to ask for their autographs, but I was afraid someone would be signing my book when Mantle came out and I would miss him. So I just stood there, watching. Finally, Mickey Mantle came down the pathway and I asked him for his autograph. He looked down at me, put his hand on my shoulder, and said, "Not right now, partner." I didn't get Mickey Mantle's autograph. Worse still, I was so focused on getting just his signature that I ended up getting no one's. I was afraid to risk while I waited for my hero to arrive.

The Bible says there is Someone coming who will consummate all of history as we know it. But this wondrous, future event presents many Christians with a dilemma. We can be so anxious for the future, and so afraid of risking, that we lose sight of the present. What should we be doing while we are waiting for Christ's return? The parable of Jesus to which we come today says that we need to learn the skill of waiting.

Over the past 18 months, these studies in Jesus' parables from the gospel of Luke have brought home to me new and refreshing insights into the truth. I hope they have done the same for you. We have seen that the deep, insightful truths of the parables come home to us in an indirect way. At first glance, many of these stories can be puzzling. They need our careful consideration. But these words of Jesus have a way of getting by our defenses and penetrating our heart.

It is fitting that our final study brings us to the last parable of Jesus from the Travel Narrative, which is found in chapters 9–19 of Luke. Our text today is 19:11-27.

**And while they were listening to these things, He went on to tell a parable, because He was near Jerusalem, and they supposed that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately. He said therefore, "A certain nobleman went to a distant country to receive a kingdom for himself, and then return. And he called ten of his slaves, and gave them ten minas, and said to them, 'Do business with this until I come back.' But his citizens hated him, and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We do not want**

**this man to reign over us.' And it came about that when he returned, after receiving the kingdom, he ordered that these slaves, to whom he had given the money, be called to him in order that he might know what business they had done. And the first appeared, saying, 'Master, your mina has made ten minas more.' And he said to him, 'Well done, good slave, because you have been faithful in a very little thing, be in authority over ten cities.' And the second came, saying, 'Your mina, master, has made five minas.' And he said to him also, 'And you are to be over five cities.' And another came, saying, 'Master, behold your mina, which I kept put away in a handkerchief; for I was afraid of you, because you are an exacting man; you take up what you did not lay down, and reap what you did not sow.' He said to him, 'By your own words I will judge you, you worthless slave. Did you know that I am an exacting man, taking up what I did not lay down, and reaping what I did not sow? 'Then why did you not put the money in the bank, and having come, I would have collected it with interest?' And he said to the bystanders, 'Take the mina away from him, and give it to the one who has the ten minas.' And they said to him, 'Master, he has ten minas already.' I tell you, that to everyone who has shall more be given, but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away. But these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them in my presence.' (Luke 19:11-27 NASB)**

As has been our pattern throughout these studies, I will begin by making some observations on the text; and then I will highlight some spiritual principles arising from it.

First, the context. The parable is surrounded with a sense of purpose. Jesus and the disciples are approaching Jerusalem, having just come through Jericho. In the Old Testament, Joshua ("Jesus") laid Jericho bare. Then, Jesus saved Bartimaeus, and also Zaccheus. This might remind us of God saving Rahab the harlot. The disciples imagine that the kingdom is coming soon ("they supposed that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately"). But Jesus informs them that they must go on to Jerusalem. The account burns with anticipation and a sense of urgency. Something is about to happen.

The next event, the Triumphal Entry, exposes the false expectations of the people. Everyone was certain this was the end. But Jesus warned the disciples that they had wrong expectations. Obviously, the direct approach was not working. His purpose in declaring the parable was to change their view of the end times. Further, it would help protect them from cynicism later when others were abandoning their commitment to him. The parable, therefore, is an essential element in the disciples' recovery. If we truly understand its context, then the suggestion that the story is about the wise use of money will seem totally unfounded. This will become even more obvious as we go along.



The story opens with the account of a nobleman traveling to a distant country to receive a kingdom for himself. This would not seem odd to Jesus' listeners. It would be typical for a nobleman who was to inherit a kingship to leave and go to Rome to receive authority. In fact, this very thing had just taken place. In Palestine, on the death of Herod the Great, his son, Archelaus, went to Rome to inherit the kingship.

Before departing, the nobleman calls ten of his slaves and gives them each one mina. (In Matthew's gospel, each slave receives a different amount, but here in Luke, they all receive the same.) A mina was worth about 100 denarii, while a denarius was the equivalent of a day's pay. This was a significant sum—more than three month's wages. The king tells the slaves to do business with what they had been given until his return. This would be accomplished by buying and selling in the marketplace. There were no stock exchanges then and no venture capital opportunities. The slaves would deal in commodities, buying and selling livestock and goods. The principle was the same then as it is today: buy low, sell high.

But the citizens hate the king. They do not want him in authority over them. They even send a delegation after him to dissuade him from returning. Historically, this occurred when Archelaus and his brother Antipas went to Rome to dispute the kingship. Not wanting Archelaus as king, the Jews sent a delegation to Rome to plead for autonomy.

Following Holy Week, the parable would be easy to interpret. Obviously, the nobleman is Jesus. After his death, resurrection, and ascension, he went to a "far country." He received kingly power when he sat down at the right hand of God; and he promised to return in the second coming. These events are pictured with the Triumphal Entry, the trial, and the crucifixion of Jesus. The citizens hate the king (the Jews did not want Jesus to be king over them). The world hates Jesus. That will never change. We do not want God; it is God who wants us.

True to his word, the king returns. He immediately calls the slaves and asks for an accounting of what they had been given. The first slave made 10 minas with his one mina, an increase of 1000%. He is praised and put in authority over ten cities. Notice that it is not his ability to make money, but his faithfulness that is praised. This will be important later on.

The second slave made five minas. We are reminded of the story of the sower whose labor had varying results. This slave is put in charge of five cities.

But the third slave hid his coin in a handkerchief. He feared his master's response if he failed to use it properly. He wasn't going to risk anything, so he plays it safe. His excuse for not doing business is his estimation of his master's character. He tells the master that he is exacting, harsh and severe; that he takes up what he does not lay down and reaps what he does not sow. In essence, he is calling his master a crook.

The king does not dispute the slave's estimation of his character. He simply judges him by his own words. The slave did not even live up to his own understanding of the king's character. If he truly thought the king was an exacting man, then he would at least have put the money in the bank and made interest. (There were banks in those days and interest would vary according to the state of the economy, just like today.) The result of the slave's action is that he loses what was given to him. His mina is taken away from him and given to the one who had ten. The principle is given: "I tell you, that

to everyone who has shall more be given, but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away." If you don't use it, you lose it.

In the final verse, a severe judgment is exacted on the citizens. They receive the death sentence. "The outrage of law violated is nothing compared to the white-hot fury of grace spurned" (Robert Capon).

This brings us now to the spiritual principles of this parable. I want to highlight four. First: *We are waiting for the certain return of the King.*

A famous Hollywood actor said in one of his movies, "I'll be back." In other words, a sequel could be anticipated. How much more should we anticipate the return of Jesus?

Jesus has already come to earth and left. And he promised that he was coming back. Today we are waiting for his second coming, what the Bible calls the *parousia*. Meanwhile, we must live in this time of "already, but not yet." Christ has come, but the kingdom has not been consummated. So we are living, as it were, in a state of tension. We do not have control. We feel we are at risk. We need to acquire the skill of waiting. A feature of sin is despair. Delay makes us want to quit. Either we suffer from a syndrome of reduced expectations or we keep adding things because we desperately need to feel secure. We grow impatient. We don't want to wait for anything. In this age of instant gratification we want results right now. Anything short of this is unacceptable.

One of the things that will help us to wait skillfully is banking on Christ's certain return. The third slave had a problem with this. He wasn't sure he should or could risk. Perhaps he thought the delegation would influence the final decision. As Christians, however, we can be utterly confident of Christ's return. We don't need to worry about a time and place. The fact of his coming is enough.

The Jews, of course, lived in constant awareness of the coming of the kingdom of God, even though they had it all wrong. Many of the great poets, Byron, Keats, Shelley, Tennyson, have written of this future event. The familiar "Battle Hymn of the Republic" centers on this theme. So does Tolkien's book *The Return of the King*, and Lewis' *The Last Battle*. The entire Old Testament anticipates the first coming of Jesus, while the New Testament anticipates his second coming.

According to the psalmist the wicked say: "there is no God." The wicked claim that they can do whatever they want because "God has forgotten; He has hidden His face; He will never see it." But they are wrong. The world has sent a delegation saying, "We do not want Jesus to reign over us." But they are wasting their time. We can bank on his return.

Our second principle is this: *While we wait for Christ's return we have something to do.*

In the story, the servants are required to act upon what they have been given. The first and second servants follow their instructions and receive approval; the third servant does nothing and is judged.

Jesus has left for a distant country. He has given us something (not money; why would he be concerned about our making money before he came back?) and he requires us to do business with it. We have been given the gift of eternal life. We have been given the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts. Jesus is telling us to do business with these until he returns.

We accomplish this, of course, by going out into the marketplace and reproducing what has been given to us. It is important to note that Jesus is talking about the daily, the routine, the ordinary. The slaves were not told to go away to a foreign land or come up with a great new invention. They were to go to the marketplace. Jesus doesn't ask us to dream up some new scheme for evangelism, travel to some out of the way place, or take 14 years of Bible classes. While these things are good in themselves, they are not the focal point of the parable.

Jesus is saying that while we are waiting for his return we are to reproduce in the midst of the ordinary and daily events of life what has been given to us. This means we are to love people and share the gospel with them. Think of the many people you meet in the course of your life. Think about the many opportunities you have in the marketplace to trade with the life that God has given to you. If we know how to wait, these opportunities will turn golden.

When my wife and I bought our first house, I felt that we would not be living there very long. As a result, I was tempted to not do much with the house. I would wait until we bought our dream house, then I would work hard, and risk my time and energy to make it what I wanted. This is how some of us are tempted to act while we are waiting for Jesus to return. But while we are waiting for marriage, for the right job, for things to fall into place, the temptation is to do nothing. We are so preoccupied with the final destination, or so afraid of risking, that we do not enter into the present. We need a skill of waiting that allows us to engage our faith in enterprises that might be risky.

Notice here the quality that is praised by the king. It is not the amount of money that was made, but rather the faithfulness of the slaves, the risk they were willing to take. The parable calls us to trust the Lord and his grace. The results really don't depend on us. The quantity of results is nothing; the quality of faith is everything. We never need be concerned with how much we are doing for God. Life is not a contest to see who can win the most souls. What is important is being faithful to the opportunities that God gives us. We are called to be faithful in little things, to risk the life we have been given rather than hide it in a handkerchief. The skill of waiting is the skill of being faithful to the work the Lord gives to each one of us.

Our model for this is the disciples, the ones whom Jesus taught. Following his death they hid out in the upper room because they were afraid of the Jews. Peter even denied the Lord three times. Just before the ascension they were still confused about the coming of the kingdom of God. They even asked the resurrected Lord, "Is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" Jesus responded: "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." Finally, when the Spirit came on the day of Pentecost, the disciples began risking with incredible boldness. They weren't making money; they were telling people about the kingdom of God. They had learned the skill of waiting, of risking, of doing business with what God had given them.

On a snowy Sunday morning in 1849, in Colchester, England, only about twelve or fifteen people attended church services in a little Primitive Methodist Chapel. The minister was not among them; he was snowed in. So one of the small group, a thin-looking man, went up into the pulpit to preach. A fifteen-year-old boy was sitting

under the balcony that morning. The words of the speaker touched his heart. The boy, Charles H. Spurgeon, went on to become one of the greatest preachers ever. When he died, forty-three years later, he had preached to well over a million people. It is estimated that he led hundreds of thousands of people to Jesus Christ. The man who preached that morning was being faithful to risk what had been given him.

Now our third principle: *The obstacle to faithful obedience is the fear of risking identity with the King.*

We have to ask why didn't the third slave risk anything? Why didn't he put the mina in the bank where there would be no risk? It was because he feared the king, he said. I think that was a cover-up. His problem was that he was afraid of being identified with the king. If he had gone to the marketplace or to the bank, the whole village would have known that he was identifying himself with the king. It was a significant amount of money; people would know that it belonged to the nobleman. The first and second slaves were willing to declare their loyalty to the king. They anticipated that their master would return, in contrast to the citizens who hated him and didn't want him to return. The third slave was not confident in his return. He was trying to hedge his bets. If he identified with the king, then he would be hated as well. If the king did not return, he wanted to be in a position to find favor with the citizens.

Jesus wants us to trade with the life he has given us. This is risky and dangerous. If we go into the marketplace and make ourselves known, we will be identified with him. The world hates Jesus, and it will hate us. If we let someone know about our faith, we might not be liked, so we tend to hide the gift in a safe place. We try to deal with God on the basis of what we think he is like rather than on the basis of what we trust him to be in Jesus. We are afraid to risk. But if we are to have the skill of waiting for his return, we must be willing to identify with Christ and risk the world's rejection.

This can be a major obstacle. When I was a new Christian I was working as an engineer. I went to church and attended a Bible study. But my colleagues were unaware that I was a Christian. I didn't want to be identified with Christ for two reasons. I didn't want to risk being hated, and I wanted to leave open my options for sinning. I was hiding in a handkerchief what the Lord had given me. Some time later I began teaching a Bible study once a week. But the people who attended did not work with me. It was easy having a Bible Study with people I didn't know. Finally, after several years, I risked being identified with Jesus. By then, almost everyone I worked with knew I was a Christian, and the Bible studies included people who knew me. I found that it wasn't as bad as I thought it might. Things really got exciting after this. One day I found a woman sitting in my office reading my notes for a wedding service. She liked what she was reading and she asked me where I attended church. From then on I went to work with a different attitude. The name of Jesus was at stake. Everyone was watching. I couldn't just do as I pleased. I was going into the marketplace to do business.

God's desire is that we do business with the life we have been given; to trade with it; to take it into the marketplace and reproduce it. The obstacle to this kind of faithful obedience is the fear of risking identity with the King.

Finally, the fourth principle: *The judgment or the reward that we receive in the future is dependent on the choice we make now.*

The parable does not have a pleasant ending. The third slave and the citizens are judged. The slave's mina is taken from him and given

to the one who already had ten; and the citizens are summoned and slain. You might be wondering whether the slave was slain as well. Perhaps he was allowed to live. The question misses the point. What it is asking is, if you don't do anything, or if you do just the minimum, will you still be saved and enter heaven? The point is to not be like the third slave.

The first two slaves are rewarded by being given increased opportunities and greater responsibility. The implication is that there will be things to do in heaven.

Faith, a trust in Christ that allows us to risk in the face of our fears, is the issue at stake. The thing that is examined at the judgment is faith. Good deeds are not the issue. The only thing that will deprive us of a favorable judgment is our unfaith in the life that God has given us. Robert Capon comments: "The precise form that the condemned servant's unfaith took was the hiding of the coin in a napkin. What that says to me is that if we keep Jesus only as a memento—or better said, if we keep the sacramentalities by which he disclosed the mystery only as events to be remembered or ideas and doctrines to be kept intact—we put ourselves out of the reach of his reconciliation."

It is important to note that there are no options available when the king returns; there are no second chances. When Jesus returns, reward and judgment have already been decided. Then it will be too late to decide whom you want to identify with. What happens at that point will depend on the choices we are making now. And failing to make a choice is essentially to choose not to believe in Jesus. To not make a choice is the wrong choice. Our life right now, today, reflects the choice we have made. We are either hiding the gift or we are in the marketplace doing business with it, being faithful to whatever the Lord has given us to do. "The only sadness is not to be a saint" (Charles Peguey).

I don't like to risk. I'm not a betting man. Years ago, I lost five dollars on the slot machines and didn't talk to my wife all day because I was so mad at wasting my money. This parable tells us that the return of Jesus is a sure thing. And so I have risked everything I have and everything I am by identifying with him. The parable teaches us the skill of waiting, what it is to be faithful, to risk, to do business, to be farsighted, and to invest in the return of the King. May we look forward to that day when he says to us, "Well done, good slave, because you have been faithful in a very little thing."

In this series of messages on the parables of Jesus, I am greatly indebted to Eugene Peterson for his wonderful class which I took at Regent College in Vancouver, and to the insightful work of Kenneth Bailey in his two books, *Poet and Peasant* and *Through Peasant Eyes*.

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