

# THE VISION OF GOD



## **A Study of the 13 Kingdom of God Parables in the Gospel of Matthew**

By Andy Zook

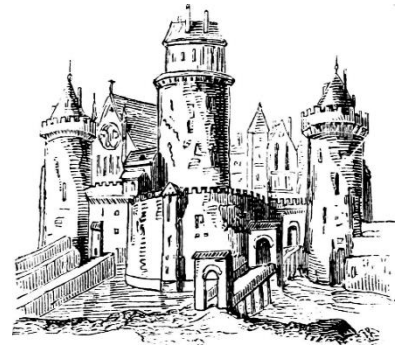
# Chapter 1: For those with ears to hear (Matt 13:15)

## Lessons in understanding God's Vision.

*Matthew 13:15 (NKJV) For the hearts of this people have grown dull.  
Their ears are hard of hearing,  
And their eyes they have closed,  
Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears,  
Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn,  
So that I [a]should heal them.'*

### Kingdoms ... not what they used to be.

There I was preparing for a Sunday school lesson doing a word search in the New Testament for the word “kingdom”. I was impressed that there were thirteen times in the book of Mathew alone where Jesus said, “the Kingdom of God is like...” and followed it with a parable describing the Kingdom of God. I have been a student of the word for long enough to recognize the significance of Jesus repeating a theme in His teaching. But ... thirteen times seemed excessive. To me, it seemed like Jesus REALLY wanted to communicate about the Kingdom of God. I started to dig deeper into each parable and some fascinating truths started to emerge. This book is the culmination of that study.



The Kingdom of God is a term that many who are very familiar with the Bible and church teachings will recognize. However, it is a term that

is very out of date. After all we do not refer to geopolitical organizations as “Kingdoms”. We call them nations or countries. But, when Jesus was teaching, the term Kingdom, had deep meaning and was an iconic symbol that represented a force or world power that would rule and control. The Jews of Jesus' day were controlled by the kingdom of Rome. Except for brief stents between oppressors, they were controlled by the kingdom of Babylon, and before that the kingdom of Egypt. The Jews were expecting the Messiah to come and setup yet another Kingdom that would trump all other kingdoms once and for all. They were somewhat correct, but the vision they had of what that kingdom would look like and how it would function and fit into the current world structure was WAY off. At any rate, the term kingdom was the one which could be easily grasped by the people Jesus was trying to reach. Jesus set out to redefine this idea of “kingdom” to match God's vision for His world order.

In thinking of more up to date terms, the term “Vision of God” holds a happy place in my imagination. I am imagining a master architect. Before the Architect can draw plans and write specifications, he/she must first have a vision. In one's vision/imagination anything is possible. In our minds eye we can construct it, turn it around, upside down and inside out before we ever put a pen to paper. When I read the Kingdom of God parables, I hear Jesus casting a vision for a new way to live, a

new world. So, when I imagine Jesus saying the “Kingdom of God is like...” I think of Him saying “The Vision of God for this world is like...”. This book endeavors to understand these thirteen parables as a complete vision of what kind of existence God desires for us today and for eternity.

The book of Matthew has more Kingdom of God parables (thirteen) than any other of the four Gospel accounts. Jesus begins in Mathew 13 by telling a parable about a Sower. In the parable Jesus describes seeds cast into four different conditions: on the path, on the rocks, in the thorns and on good soil. This parable describes three barriers to understanding that all of us may encounter; rejection or lack of meditation on the words of God, lack of faithfulness and perseverance in applying the words of God and being distracted from walking in God’s instruction by the troubles of life. The last, but certainly not least, is not a barrier, but a desirable condition ... the good soil. The good soil is who Jesus is referring to when he says, “He who has ears, let him hear.”

### **He who has ears...**

Actually, everyone with few exceptions has ears and most all of those ears can hear. Three times in the book of Mathew Jesus uses this exact phrase. In Deuteronomy 28, Moses tells Israel that God had not yet

given them a mind to understand, eyes to see or ears to hear what had gone down in Egypt. We know, of course, that it is one thing to hear something and quite another to understand. One can hear something but without understanding, it is of no use at all. I own an auto repair manual. I can read it cover to cover, but that does not make me an auto mechanic. It does not even guarantee that I will be able to fix my own car. Only when I can read the book with understanding, do I have a fighting chance. Understanding comes when I make the effort to fill in the gaps of knowledge that stand in between where I am and where I want to be. The auto manual may use terms that I am not familiar with. In order to gain understanding I must learn those terms. The book may instruct me to do some very physically demanding or tedious tasks. I must be able to know why such tasks are vital to the bigger picture. Only after all the gaps in knowledge are filled do I gain understanding. Understanding comes from effort and experience. We gain knowledge and understanding from living life. Those of us who do not simply let life sail on by but engage it and extract as much as possible out of it will gain in both knowledge and understanding.

Understanding is a key component to the troubles that Israel had encountered over its long troubled history. Isaiah 5:13 says “Therefore my people will go into exile for lack of understanding; their men of rank will die of hunger and their masses will be parched with

thirst.”[Emphasis added]. In Isaiah 6:9 says, "Go and tell this people: " 'Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.'"[Emphasis added] Let's face it, Israel was where it was over history, not because God never reached out to instruct His chosen people, but because they would not listen. They heard, but they did not understand. Maybe they were not mature enough to understand, maybe they refused to understand or maybe it was both. At any rate, they did not understand and therefore, they did not have ears to hear. To gain insight and understanding one must take a posture of openness and submission. Proverbs 15:32 says “He who ignores discipline despises himself, but whoever heeds correction gains understanding.” In order to hear you must love understanding more than gold or silver.

When I was in school, I remember many times teachers telling me, “You are a bright young man. If you would only apply yourself, you could do great things.” I never knew what that meant. I now know that they were telling me that understanding is a door locked from the inside. We control whether the door to our understanding is open or closed. I know some people may say that God controls this door. It is certainly true that God can open and close doors at His whim. However, Jesus told us that he stands at the door and knocks (Rev 13:20). It is us who God expects to open the door. Even when the metaphor is reversed (Matt 7:7) it is God who waits for our knock to open the door.

There is never a question about the door being opened, but either way, we must make the first move. It is clear he desires for us to understand, but we must apply ourselves to gain that understanding and fill the gaps of knowledge that stand in the way.

Let him hear.

Jesus does not say “make him hear”, “he will hear” or “hear this!”. He simply invites those who love understanding and are open to instruction to listen and respond. A fool listens to rebut or to make an argument, but one who is wise and loves understanding is one who listens for the purpose of being changed or repentance (which is a fancy word for changing).

Therefore, the parable of the sower and the statement at the end is addressed to individuals with a bent to understand (good soil) and is cast as an invitation to hear and respond (change or repent). Jesus knew that not all who would hear him would really hear him. Jesus is telling us that the message of the parables is only for those who are prepared to draw out the truth of God contained therein and act on it.

The next few chapters explore the parables that Jesus tells in the book of Matthew to begin to define the vision of God. Those who have ears, let them hear.

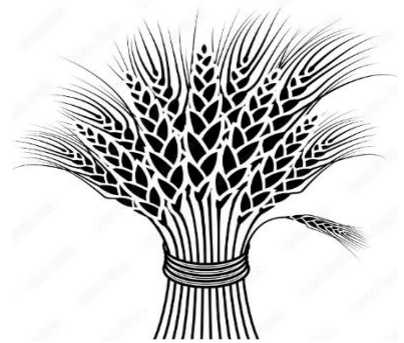


## Chapter 2: Wheat and the Tares (Matt 13:24-30)

### A lesson in God's Vision of harmony and restoration.

*Matthew 13:24-30 (NKJV) Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way. But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared. So the servants of the owner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Do you want us then to go and gather them up?' But he said, 'No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn."'"*

Have you ever looked at seeds? I'm not talking about opening a package where a full glossy colored picture and the name of the promised product is emblazoned on the package. I'm talking about a nondescript pile of seeds and looking at them and identifying what kind of seeds they are. Unless you are a trained horticulturalist, most people cannot simply look at a seed and know if it will produce flowers, fruits, or both. I would be hard pressed to tell a daisy from an apple seed just by looking at it. Most seeds don't give us a clue about what kind of plant it will produce. The only true way to solve the mystery is to plant it and see what comes up. When it comes up, we get our first clue as to the



identity of the seed. The foliage on the branches begins to reveal the nature of the seed that started it all. But the true determination is the product or the fruit. This will identify the seed once and for all. The seed holds the promise of what is inside it. We don't know what's inside the seed until it is sown, and we have a chance to witness the gift contained inside.

In Matt 13:24-30, we find the first of the Kingdom parables. Jesus speaks of a man sowing good seeds. Fortunately for us, Jesus interprets the symbols in this parable. In Matt 13:38 Jesus tells us that the “good seed” represents the “sons of the kingdom”. What is a “son of the kingdom”? A son, simply put, is the product of his parents. In this case the “good seed” are the product of the Kingdom of God.

## **Seed-ology 101**

Think of an apple tree. Not all apple trees were planted by people (special shout out to Johnny Appleseed – I'm a big fan of your work). Some came into being when apples fell from the tree to the ground. The apple rotted and the seeds sprang to life. Others fell to the ground and were eaten (yuck). Others still were snagged right off the tree by people (or animals) and eaten. BUT, the seeds still lives on. What you say? That's right, a seed is still viable even after being consumed, processed

and ... well, you know ... discarded. Wherever it lands, it is ready to spring to life to begin the next generation of apple trees.

Seeds never die. Many people collect “legacy” seeds. These are seeds that are passed down from person to person over time. Some legacy strains are hundreds of years old. The idea is that modern methods and chemicals have changed the genetic makeup of some of our most popular fruits and veggies. The legacy seeds are genetically pure in the sense that no one has tampered with the original. If, indeed, tomatoes in your great, great, great grandfather’s day tasted better, then a legacy seed should produce the same great tasting tomatoes that he tasted.

A seed is the son of its parents. A seed that came from a watermelon cannot become a rose. A seed that produces a beautiful orchid can never grow to produce a cantaloupe. A seed is ALWAYS going to produce the same thing that its parent produced. Therefore, the “good seed” that Jesus spoke of in this parable are the sons of the Kingdom. When planted it will produce ... you guessed it ... the Kingdom of God. Producing Kingdom seeds is simply the practice of making disciples. A disciple is a follower. Not a “drink the cool aid” type of follower, but a person who wants to walk with you in your journey with God. If we are truly “good seeds” then we will live the life that Jesus calls us to, the life

Jesus spoke of and the life that Jesus lived. If we do it right, if we do it like Jesus did, then people will be intrigued. Your life will be different. It will be lovely, fragrant, safe, and attractive. Like wheat “heading out”, your life will draw disciples. In turn these disciples will go forth and produce more Kingdom seeds.

### **Calling all volunteers...**

The problem is that we cannot tell Kingdom seeds from evil seeds just by looking at them. Matt 13:38 also tells us that the “bad seeds” are the “sons of the evil one”. When they sprout up, they all look like wheat shoots. In the parable, the servants only notice something is wrong when the wheat sprouted and formed heads. The two plants good and evil existed together without anyone noticing until the fruit (the head) appeared.

Both wheat and tares (known today as Rye grass) both produce a head. Until they produce the head the wheat and the Rye grass look very much alike. Rye grass is detrimental to wheat production and some strains of Rye grass known as Bearded Darnel *Lolium Temulentum* are considered poisonous. In Oklahoma, where I live, wheat is our main agricultural product. In the spring around April or May you can see the wheat plants “head out”. At the same time, you can start to see many plants called

volunteers (because no one planted them ... apparently, they just plant themselves ... neat trick!) in the mix as well. In some cases, the volunteer plants are taller than the actual wheat plants and stick out like sore thumbs. But while they are growing, they look just like regular wheat. So, you may be asking, why is this an important part of the story?

### **Everyone is a Critic.**

In verse 27 the servants come to the master and begin to question his competence. They ask him 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?' In verse 37 Jesus tells us that the Sower is the "Son of Man". Jesus never identified the servants. So, we can conclude that they were not essential to the understanding of this parable and all we can do is speculate as to what they represent. I think it is important to think about the role they are playing in this scene. I'm sure you have never run into people who wonder how a loving God could allow (or in some cases it is believed to have caused) bad things to happen. You have no doubt been confronted with statements that start "if your God is great and powerful and loving then why...?" There will always be those who love to sit in judgment over God and his ways. To reduce God down to a flawed or irrelevant entity means that they do not have to be responsible for his teaching and His direction in their lives.

When bad things happen, many people are quick to jump on the criticism band wagon. Remember how God's chosen people were released from bondage in Egypt. They soon found themselves at the Red Sea and Pharaohs' army closing in (Exodus 14:12). It was not long before they started to remember how wonderful Egypt was. "Say, why did we ever leave there? Yes, we were oppressed and beaten and killed. BUT, there was always work, a roof over my head and three squares a day." At any rate, we see it here in this story" Sir, didn't you sow good seed?" The blame game begins. We see it here, we see it in families, we see it in churches, we see it in communities, government and we see it in our own lives.

The truth of the situation we all find ourselves in is that we all have an enemy. This enemy is out to discourage and damage God' creation. The enemy does not want us to be successful. The enemy wants to bring reproach to all creation. Our job is to recognize this and not let it take us off course. The owner of the field replied, "the enemy did this.". We must identify that we have an enemy and only evil comes from his hand. It is also important to note that the enemy is not personal. He does not say "My enemy did this". The enemy is an enemy to all creation. He does not simply want to destroy you, but all of God's creation.

**Out with the bad, in with the good...**

The servants volunteer to remove ... the volunteers (the tares). And this is where the parable gets a little weird. The owner of the field tells them “no”. It is human nature to want to remove something that does not appear to belong. When we encounter something that apparently does not belong, our urge is to remove it. But Jesus is teaching us that sometimes we leave what we think does not belong. Why? In the parable, the owner of the field tells his servants that he is concerned that removing the tares now will damage the wheat. The tares are left so the wheat is allowed to complete it’s work. The work of wheat is to ... produce more wheat. At some point the wheat has done its job, its work is done and now can be removed. It is interesting to note that the tares are removed first and then the wheat is harvested.

In verse 40 Jesus is careful to point out that the harvest will occur at the end of the age AND that the harvest of tares for destruction AND the harvest of the wheat is to be done by God and His angles NOT YOU AND ME! Jesus made a point to clarify this (and in many other places noted in later chapters) so I feel it should be emphasized here as well. The end of the age (also referred to in scripture as the fullness of time) is the point in time where this existence will come to an end and eternity with God will begin ... more about that later.

## **The end game ... harmony and restoration!**

Jesus is teaching us here that the sons of the Kingdom are to live, grow and make disciples for the Kingdom side by side with the tares. The tares will draw life from us. They will slow us down. If people ate the tares, they would probably get sick. But, they are to remain and we are to produce Kingdom fruit despite the enemy's attempt to keep this from happening. This message would have been offensive to the first century Essenes sect of Judaism. The Essenes believed that God would be pleased if they separated themselves from all forms and appearances of impurity. They believed that their pure living could bring the Messiah. There has always been an element of humanity that feels the draw to pull away from the grit and pain of humanity and create some sort of spiritual panacea. A place where everyone believes the same way and lives life the same way and everyone is happy and contented. The truth is that even if such a thing or place was possible, Jesus wants us to encounter the grit and pain of humanity head on.

Jesus calls us to engage this world with all its tares and still endeavor to bring forth Kingdom fruit. Jesus is telling us to bring restoration, harmony and Shalom to the table of mankind. Don't pull away. Don't separate and don't try to separate those who you think don't belong. Our enemy has done this. I believe it was the great cartoon theologian Pogo



that said, “I have seen the enemy and he is us.” I am not suggesting that we are the devil, but when we become instruments of his purpose, when we unwittingly do his bidding, we become extensions of him and, in a sense, become the proxy enemy. How much evil in history, past and present, has been perpetrated against people in the name of God. The Apostle Paul tells us “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” (Eph 6:12) Our enemy has done this. The world we live in is not yet finished. The kingdom is about restoration. Our actions should bring restoration and healing, not brokenness. The tares must stay, and we must focus on completing our mission ... making Kingdom seeds. Making disciples.

## Chapter 3: The Mustard Seed (Matt 13:31)

**A lesson in God's Vision of pervasive love in humility and persistence.**

*Matthew 13:31-32 (NKJV) Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches."*

Have you ever seen a Mustard Tree? For all my Christian life I just assumed that there was such a beast. Let me save you hours of research, there is no such thing as a Mustard tree. Mustard, at best, is a bush. There are many different varieties of mustard. In the Mediterranean/Middle eastern geography, the yellow mustard would have been common. How common you say? About as common as the dandelions you can find in most people's lawns. That's right, Mustard is not only not a tree, but it was considered a weed! Since Jewish law prohibited that planting of weeds (unclean) into a garden (clean), this parable must have made them stop in their tracks. Not only that, but who plants weeds. Furthermore, who plants weeds in a garden!



**A Weed by Any Other Name...**

What do you know about weeds? They are hearty. No one must care for weeds to make them grow. As a matter of fact killing the little beggars is like sinking a cheerio or making Webbles fall down (they wobble you know). And you cannot just spray your yard once ... noooo. You must do it every year. In some cases you have to spray more than once a year to keep the weed hoard at bay. Cultivating a weed is laughable, they just don't need your help to thrive. Left to their own, they will be spraying you twice a year to get you out of their way!

Weeds are pervasive. They grow anywhere and everywhere. I am constantly intrigued at how a weed can grow, and do quite well mind you, in the cracks of my driveway. As the embodiment of beggars can't be choosers, they will settle for any plot of dirt they can get at. Have you ever wondered why you don't see roses coming up in the cracks of your sidewalks?

Weeds grow fast. If you see a weed and kill it, a hundred will come to its funeral. I think sometimes I can actually see them getting bigger right before my eyes. Weeds, as aggravating and frustrating as they are, are the most productive, independent, and strong plants of the whole plant kingdom. I'm sure that other plants shudder when weeds grow near. So, why would Jesus tell us that the Kingdom of God is like a weed, planted in a garden? And, why would Jesus say that this weed

grows to become a tree, which it does not, and that the birds of the air will rest in its branches!?

The answer is in the Old Testament. Remember, at this time, that all Jewish boys memorized the Old Testament by the time they were 15-18 years of age. So, when a rabbi, such as Jesus, spoke he often used Old Testament language and scripture since that was a common frame of reference. Therefore, some Old Testament background is needed to bridge the understanding gap.

### **A Short Primer in the Kings of Judah**

For the sake of brevity (and not boring you to tears), I am going to summarize large sections of Old Testament text. I encourage you to read these passages in their entirety (2 Kings 24, 2 Chronicles 36:11-14, Ezekiel 17 and Daniel 4:19-33), because they are filled with important nuances that are not really directly related to understanding the Mustard Seed parable but very relevant otherwise.

Shortly after Solomon dies (1 Kings 11) and Israel is split into two kingdoms (Samaria and Judah), there is a long parade of dreadful kings. Each one as bad, if not worse than the one before him. They would worship other Gods and do unthinkable things in the sight of God. One

of these young men was Jehoiakim who becomes king of Judah at age 25. Jehoiakim, like his father (and father's father) before him, had flatly disobeyed God.

Trying to draw the troubled Israelites back to him (remember, its all about restoration), God moved on Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, to invade Judah and make Jehoiakim his vassal. A vassal is someone who is given (more like permanently loaned) land by a king with the understanding that if that land is ever in need of defending, that the vassal would take up arms to protect the kingdom (including the land the vassal possesses). So really, a vassal is a sweet deal.

Just to keep things in perspective, you understand that it was not common practice in those days for a conquering king to leave the conquered king in power ... with all his leaders ... and all his money ... and with all his army. Basically, Nebuchadnezzar did nothing to Judah but take title and deed. All else remained unchanged. Why does a conquering king do such a thing? More on that later...

## **Judah, Strike One!**

After three years, Jehoiakim rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. This time Nebuchadnezzar comes back with friends and destroys Judah.

Jehoiakim tried to get help from the Egyptians (mostly because they had been such great allies in the past?), but God was onto them, and Nebuchadnezzar had defeated them prior and taken them out of this fight.

### **Judah, Strike Two!**

After Jehoiakim was removed, his replacement was Jehoiachin. He was 18 years old when he came to power and reigned as king over Judah for a whopping three months. Jehoiachin followed in the same evil footsteps as his fathers. Again, Nebuchadnezzar came back and removed Jehoiachin ... his family ... the leaders ... his treasury ... and the army. All he left behind was the poorest people of the land and Jehoiachin's uncle, who Nebuchadnezzar renamed Zedekiah (the Babylonians loved renaming people) and made him the king of Judah. In the immortal words of Alice Kramden, he was "da king a nutt'in!"

### **Judah, Strike Three ... your outta there!**

Zedekiah ruled for eleven years from the age of twenty-one. Then ... you guessed it ... he did evil in the sight of the Lord and rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. This is not in the text, but it is my scholarly opinion that they had decided to smash their faces into Nebuchadnezzar's fists

until he begged for mercy. Good plan! What made this rebellion even more detestable was that Zedekiah had entered into a covenant with Nebuchadnezzar in the sight of God. One thing you can always count on is that God honors covenant. This time was no exception. Nebuchadnezzar removed Zedekiah and, as Tony Soprano might say, “now he sleeps wit da fishes.”

### **Meanwhile, back at the ranch...**

In Ezekiel 17, God, through the prophet, tells a parable of his own. He describes two eagles; one with great powerful wings, long feathers and great plumage. The parable references the events I have just described above. But, at the end of the story, God describes another scene, a prophetic scene. Instead of an eagle, it is God himself. He describes how He himself will do what the kings of Judah were unable to accomplish. God would send the Messiah. The messiah is described in this prophecy as “a tender sprig from [the cedar of Lebanon’s] topmost shoots”. When planted on a high and lofty mountain “it will produce branches and bear fruit and become a splendid cedar. Birds of every kind will nest in it; they will find shelter in the shade of its branches”. I believe that this is the Old Testament reference that Jesus is using in the Mustard Seed parable. No doubt, any Hebrew hearing this with “ears to hear” would have remembered all of this.

## **One more note...**

Just in case you want a little more support for the notion that God was using Nebuchadnezzar, in Daniel 4:19-33, Nebuchadnezzar had a dream. Daniel interpreted the dream for the king. Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar that if he did not “acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes” that God would “drive him away from the people and make him eat grass like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven.”. Nebuchadnezzar ignored Daniel’s warning and a year later while he was boasting in all he had built in Babylon ... it all came true. Nebuchadnezzar was driven from the people and made to eat grass like cattle. The only reason I bring this up is that in verse 33 of chapter 4, it reads "Immediately the word concerning Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled; and he was driven away from mankind and began eating grass like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair had grown like eagles' feathers and his nails like birds' claws." It gives me chills to think of this passage in the light of what we have seen in Ezekiel. Nebuchadnezzar was the great eagle from the parable. No question. God is in control.

**Back to your regularly scheduled parable...**



Of course, the rest of the story is that the Hebrews were freed from the Babylonians and returned to the Judah where they lived for another 400 some odd years. They went right back to their old ways, just like God had known they would. This time around, God used the Romans, not the Babylonians or the Egyptians. This time, in the place of the prophets, we have Jesus. Once again the Jews were searching for a deliverer ... a messiah. They were expecting one who would defeat the Romans with military might. They were expecting a kingdom that would depose Caesar and take the land back and end the oppression. To them, Jesus must have been a huge disappointment. The Jews would have expected Jesus to talk of a small seed becoming the great Cedar of Lebanon which was a symbol of strength and power to that people. But, instead, he speaks of weeds.

### **God is in Control.**

This parable is communicating that God is sovereign. We all too often see our circumstance and quake in our boots. But God is in control. All He wants from us is our trust. He wants us to look to Him for our protection and provision. He does not want us to take up arms against a perceived enemy (remember Ephesians 5...). How do you think God would have responded if the people of Judah had at any time, stood up and said "it's true, we are a captive people. But, our God is great and we

will submit to Him who created the heavens and the earth. We bow down to the one who created me and who, by all rights, can destroy not only my body, but my immortal soul as well. Above all else I will serve Him.”

What does this all mean? God desperately wanted the kings of Judah to submit to him. It was, of course, their choice to heed the call ... or not. God, tried to put them in circumstances where He had hoped that they would change their ways and turn back to him. The great eagle was a tool in that strategy. Since Nebuchadnezzar, under the control of God, was not able to change the hearts of Judah, he decided to send one of His own ... Jesus. It would be the job of Jesus to turn the hearts of Judah back to God. It was the purpose of Jesus to get our eyes off our circumstances and back on the creator of the universe.

As we look at this series of events in the Old Testament, one thing should be apparent. God was using Nebuchadnezzar as His instrument to get Judah back in line. As you can see by the events as they unfold, each of them had opportunities. They had heard from the prophets and ignored them. Even though they felt like they were being oppressed, they were not. They were free to worship God and follow His ways each step along the journey. But they chose to take matters into their own hands and, in their own strength, attempt, with dire consequences,

to change their circumstances. Of course, they were not aware that the whole time they were not fighting against Nebuchadnezzar, but against God himself!

## **The Foolish Confounds the Wise**

The parable of the Mustard seeds tells us that it does not matter how strong you are, because there is always someone stronger. It does not matter how rich you are because there is always someone richer. It does not matter how talented you are, there is always someone more talented. All we have is from the hand of God and nothing, good or bad, comes to us that does not first pass through the hands of God. Only one thing matters in the entire universe and that is that we love others and by doing so we love God. He wants us to serve one another. He wants us to beat our swords into plow shares. He wants us to be like weeds in a garden. 1 Cor 1:27 says “But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.” He wants us to draw from the strength that comes from humility and meekness.

He wants us to be vulnerable for the cause of loving others. In doing so, we gain strength beyond mortal man, any government or army. By offering our lives as a living sacrifice, by laying our lives down we grow

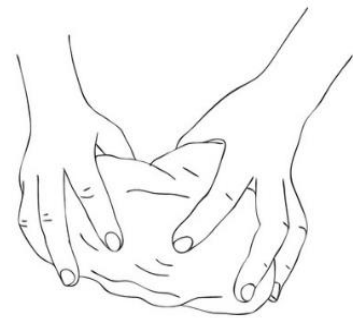
from a weed to a strong tree and the birds of the air will rest in our branches. We become a part of the Kingdom when we seek to meet the needs of others before ourselves. We become a part of the kingdom when we surrender our rights and fight for the justice of others. In God's Kingdom the trees come down and those humble, unappreciated (sometimes ridiculed, rejected, and generally misunderstood), hearty, pervasive and persistent souls will take over and change the world with love and justice and bring harmony and shalom to a broken world.

## Chapter 4: Yeast in Dough (Matt 13:33)

### A lesson in God's Vision of worship through community.

*Matt 13:33 (NKJV) Another parable He spoke to them: "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened."*

It is no accident that right on the heels of telling us a story about weeds planted by the enemy, Jesus tells us to plant weeds in the garden. Two stories that have the same circumstance (weeds being put where they do not belong), but two different spiritual implications. This parable will toy with our rational/logical mind in the same way. To fully understand we must break this parable down and examine each of its elements as a first century Jew would have.



### Interesting Facts About Yeast

Yeast, also known as leaven, is defined as “An element, influence, or agent that works subtly to lighten, enliven or modify a whole”. Yeast is a small single cell organism that converts (much in the same way that a cow “converts” grass into cow pies) fermentable sugars into carbon dioxide. In goes sugar and out comes gas. Yeast is used in dough to add the bubbles in bread that make it more palatable and flavorful.

In considering this parable one must ask one's self where would a first century Jew get yeast? It's not as if they can run down to the local Piggly-Wiggly and get a few yeast packets. It's not known for sure, but most of the yeast used would have probably been derived from what we know today as starter bread. Many years ago, my wife brought home a stinky, sticky lump of substance that she excitedly referred to as "friendship" bread. To my horror, she explained that it was ALIVE and that you had to feed it daily to keep it that way. Not only did it not live in the refrigerator, but it lived at room temperature right on the kitchen counter. I thought she was insane. However, my wife is more germ crazy than I am and if she was willing to eat the bread of death, I would stand toe to toe with her and eat it too. It actually had a kind of Romeo and Juliet sort of vibe. The paramedics could come in and find me and my love dead on the kitchen floor each with chunk of death bread clinched in our fists. At any rate, we did not die. As a matter of fact, the bread she made with it was quite good. When she made bread, she would take out a piece of the starter bread dough and mix it into the new dough to leaven it. She would feed the starter bread "stuff" to keep the yeast alive. As she fed the starter dough, what was taken out to make the last loaf of bread would (over time) be replaced by what had been taken to make the last loaf of bread. This basically can continue indefinitely.

It is believed that most of the yeast-based bread in the first century was made using this method.

This method is still in use today. The great sour dough breads of the San Francisco area are made from very old starters. Some starters are over 100 years old! The starters for these companies are a treasured asset of each. Each company feels their starter bread produces sourdough bread that is distinctive to that bakery and sets them apart from other sourdough bakeries. Some sourdough aficionados from the Bay Area can even tell what bakery produced the bread by the way the bread tastes. The active element and the element that gives each sourdough loaf a distinctive flavor is yeast.

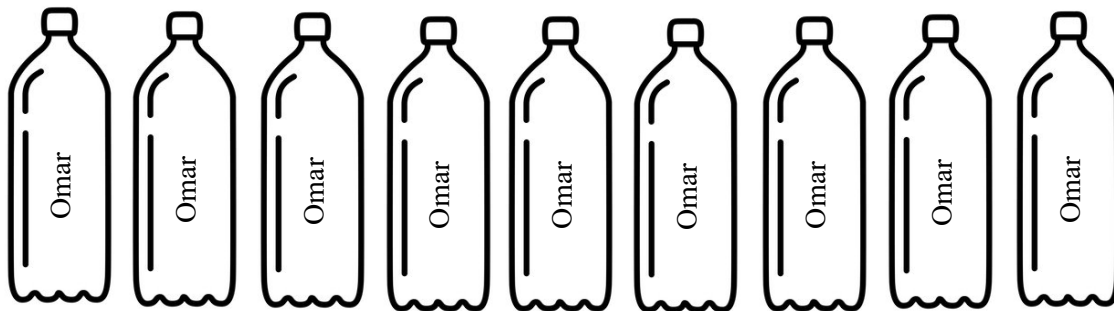
One last troubling fact about yeast is that everywhere in the Bible where yeast is used as a symbol, it always represents sin. Keep this idea in mind as I will return to it later.

## **The bread**

Bread, in the bible, always symbolizes the essence of life. Bread is the most basic form of sustenance. When a person goes to jail, we say that they will be on bread and water (another basic sustenance) rations. God tells Israel through Moses that “..man cannot live by bread alone..”.

When we meet together to share a meal, we say that we are “breaking bread”. When the children of Israel were wandering in the desert after being released from bondage in Egypt, God fed them with Manna sometimes referred to as “bread from heaven”. When covenants are established, bread is exchanged which represents the flesh of those entering into the covenant. By exchanging the bread and eating it, each member acknowledges that he is a part of the other. Jesus uses bread in the Eucharist to represent His body that was broken for us. Jesus even refers to himself as the “bread of life”. One rung up from death by starvation is ... bread. It is no surprise that bread finds a prominent place in the worship of God.

But, not all bread is equal in the bible. So, once again we must break this down further in order to fully understand this parable. In the parable, depending on your translation, yeast is mixed into a large amount, three measures or three pecks of flour or meal. In the Greek the phrase here is: treis saton or three measures. This is a vital piece of information.





The smallest unit of measure is known as an Omer which is roughly equivalent to two liters, the size of a bottle of soda. There are three Omers in one Seah. A Seah is also known as a “measure”. There are nine Omers (or three “measures”) in an Ephah. Since each Ephah contains nine Omers, then three measures of flour or meal would be 18 liters of flour or meal. We don’t know for sure how much bread that would make, but it is safe to assume that first century Jewish woman (unless she is feeding a literal army, would not be mixing dough with 18 liters of flour or meal. Under normal circumstances, this bread would go bad before it could be eaten. So, is it possible that three measures of meal had a deeper meaning?

In Genesis 18 Abraham is visited by God (and his entourage). Abraham has Sara make bread with three measures of flour. Abraham offered the bread to God and company. This event established a precedence or standard for meal/bread offerings to God. In Judges 6 God instructed Gideon to prepare, among other items, unleavened bread made with an Ephah of flour as an offering. In 1 Samuel 1, Hannah took an Ephah of flour to offer to God in gratitude for giving her a baby (Samuel). Three measures of flour were frequently used to express worship to God. When Jesus mentioned three measures of flour, this would have been a significant detail. This flour was an offering. But bread used in worship was typically unleavened. The bread in this

parable is obviously leavened. Let's consider the other symbols and revisit this important detail later.

## **The woman**

In the Bible, a woman or women typically represents God's chosen people or Israel. In Ezekiel 16:32 God refers to Israel as an "adulteress wife". In Jeremiah 2:2 He refers to Israel as His bride. In Jesus' parables where women are represented, they are typically symbols of God's people, Israel, or the Church. Jesus describes himself as the bridegroom and the church as His bride. There is much biblical support to draw from to assert that the woman in this parable is representative of the church.

## **Let's Address the Leaven in the Room**

As mentioned earlier, yeast, when used as a symbol, is never a good thing. Bread used in worship to God is almost always unleavened. As we have seen so far Jesus was frequently turning our perception of the logical order of things on its head and this is yet another case. But I don't believe He was simply just trying to stir things up for the sake of stirring things up. There is a deeper meaning behind all this. In Exodus God commanded the Hebrews to eat, among other things, unleavened

bread. This was followed by an annual Feast of Unleavened Bread as a part of the Passover to commemorate and celebrate the deliverance from Egypt and how God was faithful to release them from bondage and oppression. The Passover meal was referred to as a “meal of haste”. You were to eat it “with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand.” In this case, the unleavened aspect of the bread was simply a matter of practicality. Unleavened bread is easier and faster to make. It does not taste so good, but it will sustain life. In Leviticus, bread offered to God in worship was specifically required to be without leaven. Bread without leaven was symbolic of God. He is our provision, and He is without sin. Leaven represents sin.

In Matthew Jesus tells His disciples "Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." In 1 Corinthians, the apostle Paul refers to the “yeast of malice and wickedness”. If we hold to a traditional understanding of what yeast represents, then we would read that the Kingdom of God is like the church (the woman) folding sin (the yeast), malice, wickedness, and corruption into its worship (three measures/Epoch of meal) to God. Hardly the picture that is consistent with the rest of God’s word. The only plausible explanation is that Jesus uses yeast in this parable to represent another characteristic of the vision of God. Yeast is a substance that when a small amount is used affects a

large amount of dough. This is true no matter what yeast represents. There is another possible reason Jesus would have used yeast as a symbol in this parable. There was an exception to the rule of using unleavened bread in worship. In Leviticus (23:17) it speaks of 'You shall bring in from your dwelling places two loaves of bread for a wave offering, made of two-tenths of an ephah; they shall be of a fine flour, baked with leaven as first fruits to the LORD.' The tradition is that these leavened loaves of bread would be lifted to God. The bread, being that it is leavened, represents not a Holy God, but us, full of sin and corruption. By lifting it to God, we show Him that we are sinful and need His provision and protection. Then, the bread must be eaten together in a communal act of worship. The bread which represents basic sustenance is lifted to God and then shared with each other much in the same way as bread is shared in a covenant ritual. This bread is the only bread used in worship that is leavened.

### **What does it all mean?**

Remember the “friendship” bread. We discussed that first century Jews used a single source of starter dough and shared that dough throughout the community. It was a component of every loaf made. One can imagine that, if a sourdough aficionado can tell a bakery by the taste of the bread, that a first century Jew could probably tell what

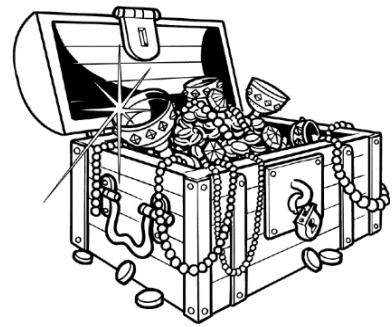
community baked the bread by its taste. The starter bread analogy is a perfect expression of community. When we serve in the Kingdom of God, we share the good fruit of the Holy Spirit with others through our works of service. In turn, they pass it on to others in similar acts. When we offer our works of service, we offer worship to God. We become the wave offering. We flavor all our relationships by the love we share. When done under the urging of the Holy Spirit in the context of community and from a heart yielded fully to God, we become a fragrant aroma. A seemingly small act of service and love can replicate itself in pervasive ways like yeast leavens a lump of dough until it has been fully affected. This affect will be passed on for generations and will testify to the goodness and provision of God, leaving a legacy for all generations to come.

## Chapter 5: The Treasure Hidden in a Field and The Pearl of Great Price (Matt 13:44-46)

### Lessons in the Value of God's Vision.

*Matt 13:44-46 (NIV) Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it.*

The next two parables Jesus tells illustrate the value of the Kingdom of God. Where the first few extolled the virtues and characteristics of the Kingdom, these put the kingdom in perspective. In essence there are two kingdoms at odds with each other; the Kingdom of man and the Kingdom of God. Or, to put it into the terms of God's vision, there is man's vision of the ideal world and there is God's vision of the ideal world. This difference between these world views is what sets the tension within the drama of our daily lives. We are born into the vision of man and God draws us, or woos us, into the other. In the parable of the treasure hidden in the field and the pearl of great price we have a picture of this tension between these two world views.



### First Century Banks and Property Law

It is important to understand a few basic things about Jewish property law. If you owned land, then you owned everything that was on that land as well. You owned the trees, the plants, the rocks and the treasure. Yes, the treasure. You see in ancient days there were no banks as we know them today. If a man wanted to keep his money safe, he would usually bury it on his property. This was a matter of practicality. In those days, conquering armies could come and pillage your village. If you put your money in a bank, it would surely be pilfered under enemy attack. If you had a safe or strong box in the house, a robber would spot it and break it or haul it off. The only way to be sure of the security of your money was to hide it in a vast acreage.

Of course, the location of such a booty was kept in the strictest of confidence. You really did not want just anyone knowing where the treasure was kept for fear that word would get out and your treasure would be robbed. On a rare occasion a man would die with this information and his treasure would be lost forever.

## **God's Treasure**

In the first of the two parables we have a treasure hidden in a field that represents the kingdom of God. It is important to note that the kingdom is not like the man who finds the treasure, but the treasure itself which

the man finds. It is a subtle difference, but a significant one none the less. Why is this significant? A Jew at the time of Jesus would have understood that in Exodus 19:5 and Deuteronomy 14:2 God referred to Israel as His “special treasure”. When Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God being like a treasure, they surely would have understood this parable to be referring to the Jews as God’s chosen people. God selected the Jews to be the light of the world. It was through the Jewish people that God would show himself to the world. God’s vision was to be glorified through His people. In turn, the world would know the goodness and righteousness of God through His people. But sadly, His people let Him down time and time again. Now, Jesus arrives on the scene with this simple parable.

Why was the treasure hidden in a field? This is an excellent question and one, I could speculate, that Jesus hoped His audience would ponder. Remember that Jesus reminds the crowds in Matt 5:14 that they are the light of the world. But the light was no longer shining out. Like an exclusive club, the Jews of the time closed ranks and only shined the light of God among themselves. In Matt 8:5-13 there is an account of a Roman Centurion who asks Jesus to heal his servant. When Jesus offers to come to his house the Centurion tells him that there would be no need. If Jesus would just issue the command, the Centurion believed that his servant would be healed. Jesus was so impressed with his faith that he spoke these words:



*When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."*

What a shocking statement. The “feast with Abraham” was a concept that finds its beginning in Genesis (where else) chapter 18. As we discussed in the chapter about the yeast in the dough, Abraham served a meal to God (and company). It was believed that one day, at the fullness of the age (end of time), there would be a reunion of sorts, and all would be reunited in the Kingdom of Heaven for a reenactment of this feast with the fathers of the faith Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. What a shock it must have been for the Jews to hear Jesus speak in this way. They understood that they were the subjects of the Kingdom, and Jesus is saying that they will be thrown outside where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth! Why? Because now the gentile, oppressors of Israel, are reflecting more of the light of God than God’s own people. To Jesus, this looks like a treasure buried in a field.

In another passage in Luke (4:25-27) after Jesus exclaimed in his hometown synagogue that He was the fulfillment of Isaiah 61, he tells

the Jews about two events from the Torah. The first event was when Elijah fed the widow of Sidon. The widow was not an Israelite, but a gentile. Many Israelites were hungry during this time famine, but God provided for the widow of Sidon. The other story was about Elisha healing Namaan of Syria from leprosy. As Jesus points out to these Jews in his hometown synagogue, there were many Israelites with leprosy, but Namaan was healed. It is also important to note that Namaan was not only a Syrian, but the captain of the army of Syria. Not only that, but at this time, Syria was at war with Israel! An Israelite girl who was taken captive told Namaan that the prophet of God could heal him. On that recommendation Namaan traveled to see the prophet of God and to make a long story short ... was healed.

Why are such details important? Because it underscores the fact that not only is the Kingdom of God at hand, but it has always been. But, the Jews, God's chosen people, the lights of the world, God's own treasure, could not see past their own selfish preoccupation to grab hold of it. Jesus is making the point that such a light will not be hidden. The kingdom of God will shine forth.

**A Treasure Found!**

But, of course, this is not the end of the story. A man finds the treasure. We know nothing about the man. Therefore, we can conclude that there is nothing of note about him as an individual other than his actions regarding the treasure. We do know that he is a man of integrity. The man knew that to rightfully possess the treasure, he must buy the field. But here is where we encounter a bit of an ethical dilemma. Does the man report to the owner what his field contains? If the owner knows what the field contains, he would not sell or would sell it at such a price that the man could never afford to purchase it. If the landowner is unaware of the treasure in his field, there is a good chance the price of the field would be more than offset by the treasure contained therein. It is to the man's advantage to allow the man who owns the field to remain ignorant of the value contained in his own field. This seems a bit underhanded. But is it really? If a man is so ignorant of a treasure in his own field that a stranger stumbles upon it, is he really worthy of it. In other words, if the owner really appreciated what he had, he would have already found the treasure himself or would have never lost it in the first place. One would have to be substantially negligent to lose it or to have never found it himself. After all, to these people, at this time, the land was life. They lived off the land. An owner would be (should be) intimately familiar with his own land. If not, he might be considered by his own community to be a lazy and hapless steward. In the prevalent culture of the day, such a landowner would have been thought of as ripe

for such a transaction and few would have had pity on him. The man who found the treasure and made such a transaction would have been heralded as a shrewd businessman and as a result respected in the community.

In the parable of the pearl of great price we have a very similar setup. The treasure is not hidden, but for sale. There is no great discovery, but more of recognition, like finding a priceless painting or an original draft of the Declaration of Independence at a garage sale. We know the man is a merchant. We can assume that he was not the only one, and we can also assume that this pearl was available to all merchants as it was to this one. So, what makes this so noteworthy? Unlike the other merchants, this one sold everything he had to possess it. It is reasonable to assess that all the merchants saw the pearl and knew of its great value, but only one took action to possess it. Like those merchants, the pearl of the kingdom of God is not always hidden, but in plain sight, and many are those who view it and see it as having great value, but rare are those who move from recognition to action. Few are those who will, after assessing the value of the kingdom of God, make the sacrifice to build into it. If such is the case, the question begs to be answered; did they really understand its great value? If so, then they would “with joy” sell everything they owned to possess it. The parable of the pearl gives us a perspective about the value of the Kingdom of God. The parity between

the two parables shows us that the Kingdom of God is of great value, and you should seek it out and acquire it no matter the cost because in the long run, the price you pay will be justified by the fruit it will render.

### **Treasure Acquired!**

The value of the treasure hidden in the field and the pearl of great price was undeniable. The man “with joy” goes and sells everything he owned. The word “joy” here does not describe “happiness”, but an anticipation of a desired outcome. This was a sure thing. The Roman Centurion traveled a great distance to find Jesus. Based on the exchange we have between Jesus and the Centurion, I think it is safe to assume that he rode with joy to see Jesus. Remember that it was not common for Roman Centurions to get caught up in the religious trappings of the Jews. Not only that but remember that the Centurion was not seeking healing for himself, his wife, kids or even a family member. He was seeking healing for a servant. Apparently, this servant was highly valued by the Centurion in a time when it is safe to say that servants were a disposable commodity. Jesus tells the Centurion "Go! It will be done just as you believed it would." Treasure acquired!

The widow of Sidon, at great risk of cutting short the life of her and her child, prepared the last morsel of food they had in order to give to

the prophet. What faith it was to take your last meal and feed it to someone else. But God blessed the widow, her son and the prophet who ate for several days, and there was still flour and oil left over. Treasure acquired!

Namaan traveled a great distance, into enemy territory to meet with the prophet. Elisha did not meet with him at first and had his servant tell the commander of the army to wash in the Jordan. Namaan almost missed his blessing from God over being offended at the request and the fact that Elisha sent his servant to deliver the instructions. But he took a step of faith and the bible records that Namaan's skin became as a little child's. Treasure acquired!

Seek the Treasure

Jesus is informing the Jews that their status as God's chosen people was not as much about an exclusive club where all the Jews are "in" and all those who are not Jews are "out", but rather about being a light to the world. Anyone, Jew or gentile qualifies as God's chosen when he or she shines the light of God to a world cast into darkness. We live in a broken and sick world and buried in it is a treasure of great value. We have in our grasp the keys to unlock poverty, oppression, hunger and sickness. But like the owner of the field or the other merchants passing by and viewing the pearl of great price, we do nothing. We remain

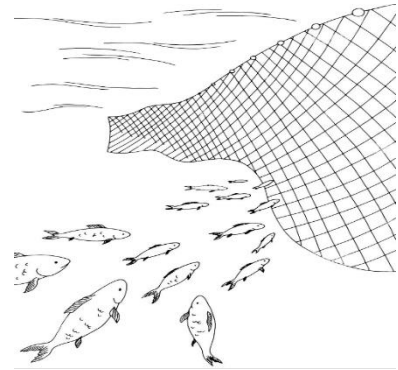
ignorant and apathetic. We ask questions like “how can such a loving God allow suffering to occur?”. I think Jesus’ response might well be, “that would be my question to you”. In the treasure we find the promise of God. He will supply if we shine our light on the world. We are all chosen to find and acquire the treasure of the Kingdom of God. God’s vision is that all people would give everything they had to see that creation is restored. God has provided, we have only to act.

## Chapter 6: The Net (Matt 13:47-50)

### A Lesson in God's Vision of Faith, Self-denial and Service.

*Matthew 13:47-50 (NKJV) "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind, which, when it was full, they drew to shore; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but threw the bad away. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just, and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth."*

The parable of the Dragnet occurs only in the Gospel of Matthew. It does bear striking similarities to the parable of the wheat and the tares.



- The wheat and the tares both exist together just as the good fish and the bad fish exist together in the lake. Both parables express this characteristic of the kingdom as being a realm where perceived “good” and “bad” coexist.
- The angles, not man, will separate the “good” from the “bad” at the appropriate time.
- The “bad” in both parables are destroyed by fire.

But this parable does have a few distinct differences that also bear examination. In the parable of the wheat and the tares, the field represents the world, and, in this parable, it is the lake that represents the



world. In the parable of the wheat and tares, the wheat must grow and develop to produce its bounty whereas the fish simply must be collected using the net. In the parable of the wheat and tares the kingdom is compared to the man sowing and, in this parable, it is compared to the net. One emphasizes the one who sows, while the other focuses on the device of collection ... the net.

So, let's focus on these differences to bring more clarity to a familiar theme in the kingdom of God parables. How do these differences help us to better understand what Jesus wanted us to know about the kingdom of God?

### **Not Your Daddy's Fish'in Trip**

Fish and Fishing represented the livelihood of many a first century Jew. This is especially true of those in the region that Jesus came from. Without fish the Jewish diet is adversely affected. Unlike today, fishing was not a pastime, but a necessity. Jesus used a frame of reference that most Jews of the time could identify with. The contents of those nets were precious cargo and sustenance. Great care and effort were exerted to collect as many fish of all kinds as possible so that some might be saved as food.

Fishing in the time of Jesus was a team effort. Many young men were used to set the nets, steer the boat, pull in the catch, and sort the good from the bad. They had to work as a single unit, for one cause, to succeed. They all had a vested interest in the outcome. This continues to present day. There is a television program that follows Alaskan King Crab fisherman as they spend an intense 4-6 weeks in harsh conditions to capture as many crabs as possible. Each man on the boat gets a percentage of the net profit from the fishing enterprise. These short, but intense, fishing trips can be quite dangerous. But the payoff is potentially worth the risk. Men who have a vested interest in the outcome of an enterprise will give themselves more fully than those who do not.

## **The Lake**

Unlike wheat that had to grow and be tended to until it yielded its produce, fish live in the lake and are there for the taking at any time. Unlike wheat though, for the most part, you cannot see fish in the water. They could be anywhere. They could be where you are fishing ... or not! Wheat pretty much stays where you put it. Wheat is boring. Growing wheat does require faith and perseverance, but your field is always in plain sight. You know immediately where you stand with a crop in the field. When you are a fisherman, the same waters that

yielded an abundance of fish the day before, may render nothing today. The waters teeming with fish looks just like the waters that are barren. Like the farmer, the fisherman draws on great faith and perseverance to keep fishing.

## **The Net**

In this parable the net is the object of the comparison to the kingdom. The net gathers everything in its path... good and bad alike. I remember that scene from Forest Gump where Forest buys the shrimp boat and starts to fish. The nets kept pulling up everything, boots, cans and various pieces of litter ... but no fish! That is the characteristic of that form of fishing, you get everything. The kingdom of God is that way. As we saw in the wheat and the tares, there will be good and bad together in the same net. For the Jew, bad meant “unclean”. The Jewish law is very clear about what can be eaten and what cannot. For example, according to the law a Jew cannot eat shellfish, eels or other “scavengers”. This was based on a principle of health. Scavengers feed from the sea bottom and picked up whatever dead contaminated remains fell there. To eat one of these, you would be eating what they ate, and what they ate was dead and possibly diseased. Dietary laws regarded these fish as dangerous to consume and therefore were to be discarded as “bad” fish.

## **Keep Plug'in**

As with the parable of the wheat the main thrust of this parable is to apply the same faith and persistence that the farmer and fishermen had to apply to make a living. In the kingdom we will be faced with situations and circumstances that will frustrate us. We will experience setbacks. We will have moments of self-doubt. We will experience intense times of self-righteousness where we find ourselves being god and succumb to the temptation to marginalize people into “good” and “bad”. You see if we can label them “bad” we can marginalize them, and this relieves our pain. We can put the burden on those “bad” people who are going to burn in hell anyways. But the point of Jesus telling us about the kingdom containing both good bad was not so we can get to work separating the good from the bad as is our natural tendency. Jesus was giving us a heads up that our work in the kingdom will be with those who don't seem to meet our expectations. Those who appear to be “bad”, may be good at heart. Those that appear to be “good” may be bad at heart. We only see the outside of a person, but God sees the heart and judges man according to his/her heart. It is not our role to determine who is “in” or who is “out”, but to gather all people into the kingdom. This can be a frustrating pursuit laced with pain and suffering, frustration, and heartache. Years ago my wife and I counseled a woman

who was considering cheating on her husband. We spent many hours talking to her about this choice. We felt like we had reached her and that she was going to do the right thing. Not long after this meeting she confessed to us that, after this meeting, she had met a man and had a moral failure. What a crushing heartbreak.

## **Pearls of the Kingdom**

Jesus calls us to a life where pain and suffering are an integral part of our love for others and a part of the kingdom of God. In other words, holiness and sin are at odds. If we identify ourselves with Christ and holiness, then we are at odds with the nature of sin and evil of this broken world in which we find ourselves. Since the kingdom of God has an element found within it (a large one at that) of perceived evil, then it is only logical that you and I will be frustrated and irritated at its presence as we endeavor to live amongst it. In the same manner that a clam turns a small piece of sand that is an irritant in its tender tissues into a beautiful pearl, so we must also bear the pain and suffering of this world's brokenness to produce pearls of the kingdom. Jesus found himself frequently at odds with the religious authorities and even his own disciples regarding the priorities of the kingdom of God verses the priorities of man;

- Lack of faith among God's chosen people (Matt 8:5-13)
- Misplaced priorities of followers (Matt 8:19-23, 12:38, 16:7, 16:22, 17:24-27, 18:1-3, 20:21-22)
- Disciples fear a storm (Matt 8:24-26)
- Religious leaders questioning his actions (Matt 9:1-6,10-17,11:3,19,12:1-8,24,15:3)
- Religious leaders leading their people astray (Matt 15:3-20,23:1-39)
- Lack of repentance (Matt 11:20)
- Traps set for him by the religious leaders (Matt 12:10,16:1,22:12-18,22:23-29,36)
- Unbelief in hometown (Matt 13:53-58)
- Peter walks on water, then looks away (Matt 14:31)
- Disciples cannot heal a demoniac boy (Matt 17:14-21)
- Unrepentant Rich young ruler walks away from Jesus (Matt 19:23)
- Father's house turned into a den of thieves (Matt 21:13)
- Betrayed by one of his own disciples (Matt 26:21-25)
- Tried and convicted under false pretenses (Matt 26:57-68)
- Peter denies knowing Jesus (Matt 26:74-75)
- Suffers a tremendous beating and crucified on a Roman cross (Matt 27:33-50)

This tension finds itself into our lives today as it did in Jesus' earthly ministry. But Jesus did not simply brush aside those who did not "get it". If he had done that, then there would be no one left to take the gospel to an unbelieving world. There would be no one left to shine the light of God into a darkened world. To be a part of the kingdom of God means that we must acknowledge this tension just as Jesus did. This is at the heart of Jesus' challenge to those who, endeavor to follow him, of self-denial. This is a painful process. But if you truly love, then the pain is worth it.

### **Take The Hit**

You are no doubt familiar with the phrase "I would take a bullet for him/her". This is sometimes used to talk about someone very close. It does NOT mean that they would love to be shot with a gun! It does mean that this person's love for another is so strong that they would suffer the pain of a gunshot if it means saving that person from the pain and experience of it. You see the pain and suffering is not just pain and suffering for the sake of pain and suffering, but rather it is pain and suffering in order to save someone else from it. Jesus came to this earth to save you and me from the pain and suffering of sin and brokenness. To do this he absorbed the sin of this world. He takes the bullet. He takes the hit for you and me. This was a painful process. But he did it

with joy. Not because he loved to be beaten and nailed to a cross, but he wanted you reunited with the Father for all eternity. He wanted to see you and me become the best versions of us we can possibly be. He calls us to do no less. He calls us to deny ourselves, pick up our cross and follow him. This is a painful process.

### **Joy - The Thrill of the Catch**

It involves faith. My friend Tommy says that if you really love to fish it doesn't matter if you catch anything or not. I guess I don't like "to fish", I like "to catch". But he is right; fishing is about the pursuit of fish. No fisherman will tell you that catching is not a fun part of the experience, but it is the thrill of the chase that keeps them engaged. It is the prospect that they will find that sweet spot where they can get into the great catch ... the big one. But a fisherman will get their line wet many times without catching a single thing and still come back. It is the joy of the catch that keeps a fisherman going. And so it is with us. It is the joy of the catch that we keep putting our nets out. Will you go to the lake and cast your nets in the same spot where the day before you pulled out boots, trash and eels? Would you plant a crop in a field where the last crop failed the season before? In the kingdom of God you should...with joy. In doing so, you join Christ in seeking and saving that



which was lost. You further the kingdom of God and you bring us one step closer to restoration, wholeness, and Shalom.

Hebrew 12:2 (NKJV) looking unto Jesus, the [a]author and [b]finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Jesus died for all... good and bad. Only God the father knows the difference. Embrace all with love and forbearance. Bear one another's burdens. This is the gospel of Christ. This is the joy set before you and me.

## Chapter 7: The Householder (Matt 13:52)

### A lesson in God's vision of balance

*Matthew 13:52 (NKJV) Then He said to them, "Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old."*

The story was told some years ago of a pastor who found the roads blocked one Sunday morning and was forced to skate on the river to get to church, which he did.

When he arrived the elders of the church were horrified that their preacher had skated on the Lord's Day. After the service they held a meeting where the pastor explained that it was

either skate to church or not go at all. Finally, one elder asked, "Did you enjoy it?" When the preacher answered, "No," the board decided it was all right! (Today in the Word, December, 1989, p. 12.)



Why is it human nature to boil life down into a ridged set of do's and don'ts? In this parable Jesus addresses this element of man toward legalism. It seems a bit of a reach I know, but if you will hang with me I think I can bring this into focus. As usual, we must first understand the symbols in a first century Jewish context.

**Grammateus by any other name...**

In the Greek the word “teacher of the law” (NIV) is grammateus which means a clerk, scribe, public servant, secretary or recorder. Why do some biblical translations say “scribe” (NASB, KJV, ASB) while others translate it as “teacher of the law” (NIV, Amplified, NLT, Message). These seem like a significant difference, so which one is right? They both are. The role of a scribe changed over history. Depending on where you stand in the stream of time determines what grammateus means in the context in which it is found. To understand this, we must understand the changing roles of the Scribe.

Prior to the Babylonian exile, the scribes were simply the people who were tasked with copying manuscripts. There were no printing press or photocopiers and the only way that copies of a document could be made was to have a scribe painstakingly copy them. A scribe could read and write, which made them a rare commodity since literacy was limited to an elite few. Scribes were used in government as well as religion. Anywhere a written document needed to be copied a scribe was the tradesmen who would do it.

When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon to rebuild the wall and reestablish the practice of the Law of Moses, it was Ezra, the scribe, who was responsible for the re-indoctrination of the

returning Jews into the law of God (also referred to as the law of Moses since he was the one who wrote them all down). While in exile (and truth be told quite a while before that) the Jews had lost touch with God's law. Ezra being a scribe had a copy of the book of the law and began to read it aloud following the restoration of the city walls to the assembly of returning Jews in Jerusalem. As they began to understand what was written, they began to practice it. The book of Ezra says that "[he] had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel." At this point in Israel's history the Scribe had turned the corner from being merely a copier of manuscripts and had now begun, in the tradition of Ezra, to be "experts in the law". As time goes on the Scribe begins to grow in esteem and importance. As an expert in the law, the scribe would be called on to settle disputes among Jews based on that law. Therefore, the Scribe, by the time Jesus entered the picture, had gained tremendous power and influence within the Jewish community. We could loosely compare the ancient scribe of Jesus day with the contemporary lawyer or judge.

A scribe (teacher of the law) in Jesus day was one who had authority to interpret the law and apply it to real life situations. For example, let's say a man, let's call him Bob, bought some property from another man, let's call him Bubba. Initially, Bubba felt he had made a great deal. Bob

purchased the land for quite a bit more than Bubba felt it was worth. However, no sooner did the ink dry on the deal; Bob throws a big party at his new place. It seems Bob has stumbled across a treasure buried in Bubba's old field and purchased the land from Bubba who had no idea it was there. Bubba feels cheated. So, Bubba goes to the Scribe/Teacher of the Law and claims that Bob was wrong to do that to him and, in essence, has stolen from him. Bob replies that he has followed all the Jewish laws and traditions. The teacher of the law thinks hard and deep and decides that Bob has fulfilled the law and Bubba is outta luck! As you can see in this purely hypothetical example, the teacher of the law would have a great deal of power.

### **The Owner of the House**

The authority of the teachers of the law in this parable is compared with that of an owner of a house. The word in Greek is oikodespotes (oi-ko-de-spo'-tās) and means simply master of the house. Some translations refer to this as householder or owner of the house. As an owner of a house, you would have absolute authority to do as you like. Already you can see that this parable has a great deal to do with authority. Matt 13:27 refers to a landowner who planted a field, in Matt 20:1 a landowner hires laborers, in Matt 21:33 a landowner plants a vineyard and there are many more. Jesus uses the landowner metaphor

repeatedly in the parables. Why? Jesus wanted the Jews of his day as well as you and me to understand that in the Kingdom of God we have authority in the same way that an owner of a house has authority. Why is this important?

## **Goods Both New and Old**

The idea of a householder bringing both new and old from his treasury is a most obscure and difficult idea. Scholars have many points of view on what Jesus was referring to. Most likely this is referring to a practice (continued to this day) where people rotated produce. To make sure that all the oldest produce was consumed before it went bad; the old would be brought out with some of the new. The old so it could be consumed before it went bad and the new to be consumed while it was at its best. This method was a balance of new and old such that the best use of provisions could be achieved. But what does this have to do with teachers of the law and the kingdom of God? Jesus was contrasting the use of the law (an old thing) with the practice of serving others sacrificially (a new thing – I could pause here and make a compelling argument as to why this was not a “new” thing, but it would detract from the scope of this book). Both observing the law and laying your life down for others were valuable, but only when brought out together.

In Matt 23:23 Jesus says the following “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.” We don’t know if Jesus is making an absurd statement about the Scribes and Pharisees tithing mint, dill and cummin, but we understand that he is telling them that they go to great extremes to keep the law. But Jesus also tells them that they do not keep all of the Law. He goes on to say that not only have they not kept all of the Law, but they have ignored the most important ones! Notice that Jesus does not condemn the practice of tithing of mint, dill and cumin, but rather the ignoring of the weightier provisions of the law.

### **The Weight of the Law**

In the Hebrew culture, concepts/laws in the Torah had weight. Notice how many times in the gospels that “a teacher” or “expert in the law” asked Jesus which commandment was the greatest, or where he was challenged with a situation where two laws from the Torah were played against one another. There was a seemingly endless obsession to categorize the laws of the Torah such that one could focus on the most important ones. The problem with this task is that God never meant for his laws to be followed that way. God’s laws were designed to guide us

in the practice of loving God and loving others. The laws were to be followed to enrich and heal our broken world, to understand our own brokenness, not to fulfill some giant religious to-do list. But this is what it precisely had become.

God's law had been hijacked by men to control other men. This in turn furthered man's brokenness and did not bring healing to our broken world. Jesus shows up on the scene to set this straight. The purpose of the law was to instruct us to honor and care for one another and these ideas are more important than a strict rigid adherence to the rules. In essence, Jesus was telling them to honor the heart or principle of the law not the letter. Never does Jesus indicate that the law is bad. The law is good, but he taught us that we do not gain right standing with God (righteousness) from following the law, but in following the way of Jesus. Jesus, in this parable is asking those who are teachers of the law to not just teach the law as a rigid set of dos and don'ts, but rather to include also elements of the weightier variety like justice and mercy and faithfulness. It is analogous to fire. Fire can cook your food and warm you, or it can burn your house down and kill you. One element, two very different outcomes. The law, when handled as God intended, will render liberty and healing. When handled incorrectly, it will render death and destruction. This was true in the days of Jesus as it is today. We see it all around us.



If we consider that we are all disciples of the Kingdom of God and we are teaching and proclaiming the gospel message, then we must temper our love for the “old” (God’s law) and mix it with the “new” (love for others, justice, mercy and faithfulness). In this way the Kingdom of God becomes a place where broken people come to receive healing. Many times we tend to be like the scribes. We show up after the battle and viciously attack the wounded. The Kingdom of God calls us to a new reality where the law of love, mercy, justice and faithfulness find greater weight than the other laws. The other laws are important to God, and have value even today, but not when they are used to hurt and control others.

In God’s vision there is a balance between a strict adherence to God’s Law and mercy, justice and faithfulness. The law has value when we understand the principles they are based on. When we place a higher value on mercy, justice and faithfulness than on the rigid expression of the law, we are living out God’s vision. I don’t think it is an accident that, in this parable, the new is listed before the old.

## Chapter 8: The Unjust Servant (Matt 18:23-35)

### A lesson in God's Vision of Greatness in the Kingdom

*Matt 18:23-35 (NKJV) Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!' So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?' And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses."*



As broken people, we have a bent toward selfishness. It is a sad effect of the fall, but each of us demonstrates this nature even as young children. From our earliest ages we fight over toys. MINE, MINE,

MINE. As we get older, we learn to tear each other down so we can feel better about ourselves. Even older still we learn to cater to those who can make us feel better about ourselves even if it means we look the other way or tolerate bad behavior. We become “man pleasers”. We are lovers of self, looking out for number one. And sometimes, when we can’t seem to please other people and we cease to love ourselves, we tend to feel that life is not even worth living. Even our seemingly selfless acts can be tainted with little bits of selfishness. Left in this depraved state of mind, our will is drawn to that which promises to make us feel good. However, the promise is empty and only leaves us hungry for more.

### **MINE, MINE, MINE**

Jesus addresses this mind set and challenges his disciples to view the world and the part they play in it in a radically different way. The parable of the unjust servant comes at the end of Matthew chapter 8 and is the culmination of a series of teachings that Jesus gave to his disciples when one of them asked him “which of them would be greatest in the kingdom” or translated into child speak ... MINE, MINE, MINE! It is almost as if Jesus was thinking this very thing when he began this teaching by using a child as an example of the greatest in the kingdom. Jesus takes this question of greatness and turns it on its head. He

challenges them to become as a child. Not the MINE, MINE, MINE kind of child, but the totally dependent kind of child; a child who has not yet been tainted by adult cynicism. Children dream of being fireman, astronauts or president when they grow up. Children tend to see the good in things. To a child the brokenness of this present world is not yet a factor in their thinking process. Of course, we all know that this does not last and the brokenness that lives within every one of us will ultimately come full force to the surface. But Jesus here indicates that we should endeavor not to become “the greatest”, but to become totally dependent on God and childlike in our view of the world.

This is a tall order. How does childlike innocence spring into adult cynicism? Broken adults corrupt broken children. As if that was not a strong enough challenge, he goes on to say that we are to do all we can to protect these children. He exhorts the disciples to not cause “one of these” (children) to stumble. Why? Obviously, we cannot keep them from being broken, no one can keep them children forever (believe me I have tried and in every case I failed ... they grow up) and we are all born broken. But what I think Jesus is really addressing is a new mind set, a new way of seeing the world. Instead of thinking about their own position in the kingdom (who is the greatest) he wants them to think about the welfare of “the children”. The greatest in the kingdom thinks about others before themselves. He exhorts us to leave behind the

trappings of brokenness and focus on preserving the integrity of the next generation. We cannot keep them from being broken people, but we can channel the energy we would normally spend on seeking our own place in this world to make sure that someone else is taken care of.

## **The Stumbling Block**

In the Old Testament a “stumbling block” was representative of those who did evil deeds in the sight of others and lead them to do the same. At this point, Jesus is not talking about little children, as much as all of those who believe in Jesus and endeavor to follow him. He is now exhorting his disciples to look after the welfare of those who believe in him. We do this by minding our thoughts and actions. Jesus acknowledges that we live in a broken world and that brokenness will manifest itself in stumbling blocks, but as those who endeavor to be “the greatest in the kingdom” we go to great strides to be sure that we are not a stumbling block to those who follow after Jesus.

This is among the most challenging concepts in the Christian life. I know people who wrestle with the question of consuming alcoholic beverages. There are many good (and bad) arguments to be made about what God has to say in the bible about drinking. But, to me, the issue of not creating a stumbling block is the most compelling. I can tell you that

many Christians who drink do not care for this argument because it puts the burden of the welfare of others squarely in our court. It makes me responsible for what they might do. In this day and age, we probably struggle to manage our own welfare, so the idea that I am responsible for me and you seems too much of a burden for us. But, remember, we are talking about being “the greatest in the kingdom” and such a title comes with a very heavy burden ... your brother’s.

As if this concept is not heavy enough as it is, Jesus adds more on to it. Jesus goes on to say that we must value the spiritual welfare of his “children” so much that we would rather cut off body parts than harm another believer. So now we move from mere inconvenience to physical dismemberment. Jesus reserves phrases like “eternal fire” and “fiery hell” for those who would so carelessly cause His “children” to fall. Don’t you imagine that by this time the disciples are looking at each other thinking “whose bright idea was it to bring this up?” But, you see, being “the greatest in the kingdom” is not for the faint at heart. It is gravely serious business.

## **Lost Sheep**

Jesus then begins to tell a story about a lost sheep, that he would leave ninety-nine to find the one. God cares about the lost sheep; but what

about the ninety-nine? Seems a little irresponsible to leave the ninety-nine and find just one. However, Jesus says it as a matter of fact that a shepherd would do such a thing. When sheep are herded together they are not as susceptible to attack because in the group they are somewhat intimidating. Predators tend to look for the stragglers. Rarely will a predator attack a herd. They may try to scatter the herd and attack the ones who got separated, but rarely will they just jump the herd and attack. When we think of it in this way we can see that the lost sheep is truly the one in great danger while the sheep herded together were not so much. The sheep in the herd protect and defend each other as a group and Jesus takes off after the one in danger.

So why are “lost sheep” so important in the context of this story. God cares about lost sheep and so should we. But how can we be so concerned about the “lost sheep” if we are trying to be “the greatest in the kingdom”. Jesus wants us to know that being the greatest in the kingdom means that not only do you keep his children/sheep from stumbling/getting lost, but you are also to hunt them down and bring them back. You see the end game here is restoration. God wants you to be reconciled to each other.

**Finding Lost Sheep ... a Dirty Nasty Business**

Jesus goes on to talk about church discipline. He starts out “when your brother sins...” Trust me your brother (or sister) will sin and when they do, Jesus lays out a structured approach to find that lost sheep and bring them back into the flock. I have only seen this process followed once in my life. A church I attended back a few years ago presented a young man to the congregation. Apparently, as they related the story, this young man had been involved in some kind of sinful behavior. They did not elaborate on what it was, and I did not ask, but whatever it was he was confronted about it privately. His sinful behavior did not change. Then, a couple of people visited with him and still no change. This young man was brought before the church and the young man refused to change his ways, so he was asked to leave until he would change his behavior. Now so far, this story does not sound so unusual and sadly this is where many such stories end. How tragic that a structured approach that Jesus gave us to restore someone to the flock has been so misused to separate people from it. As I indicated before, this story is not over. All of these things transpired before I had started attending this church. On this day they shared his story to the congregation and presented the young man back into fellowship. He was repentant as he addressed the church and there was a great celebration. Why is this so rare? We don’t take enough time to have close intimate relationships with people that allow us the kind of access to know or confront someone who is in sin. We are afraid we will make



them angry. We don't feel right about separating someone from our fellowship that is a broken person like us. We feel hypocritical. Sometimes a shepherd who had a sheep that kept wandering off would break its leg to force it to stay close to the flock. This may seem cruel, but to the shepherd it was better to walk with a limp than to be wolf chow.

In the same way, it may seem cruel to separate someone from fellowship for a season, but sometimes, for some people, they must come to the end of their rope to be truly ready for a change of direction in their life. Another word for changing direction is called repentance. What courage it takes to do this properly. Those who desire to be "the greatest in the kingdom" understand how important it is to deny yourself and do the hard things. To separate (to loose) and to bring back (to bind). It is the bring back that seems to take the most courage. How would we act differently toward those who have been separated from us (either their choice or ours) if we knew the end game was to see them back again. Would we speak of them differently? Would we pray for them? Would we call them from time to time? Would we have lunch with them once in a while?

This does create a bit of a problem. The Hebrew law says that we should forgive someone three times. Peter no doubt begins to think

about this teaching. Such a new way of seeing the world is going to require a lot more forgiveness. You have got to give credit to Peter for making the connection between these teachings of Jesus and the act of forgiveness. If we are truly going to be “the greatest in the kingdom”, Peter probably thought, “then we should probably forgive someone up to seven times!” After all seven was the number of perfection. But Jesus raises the bar even higher and tells Peter to forgive seventy times seven. Of course, this is a metaphor for infinite. There is no end to the number of times we are to forgive. To illustrate this point Jesus tells the parable that is the focus of this chapter.

## **Forgiveness**

Throughout all of Matthew chapter 8 Jesus is teaching his disciples that greatness in the kingdom is a place where others are exalted over you. We end up on the subject of forgiveness, because after all we are broken people and to stop the cycle of brokenness, forgiveness is vital. We are all broken people and broken people have sharp edges. When those sharp edges touch others they become more broken. When we become more broken we can harbor bitterness which adds to the cycle of brokenness. If we can get to a place where we can stop the cycle (through forgiveness) maybe we can start the healing process and slow

(or dare we hope, through the power of our risen savior, stop) the breaking process.

Jesus tells us the kingdom is like a king settling accounts. The king is trying to collect on some debts. One of his servants owes him 10,000 talents. You simply cannot fathom the impact of this parable unless you understand that 10,000 talents today would be worth three billion dollars. It is hard to imagine how a servant would have come to owe such a large amount, but it really is not important to the point of this parable. The main point (and I think Jesus makes this quite clear) is that there is no way possible this person can pay back that debt.

The king's plan is to sell the servant and his family to clear the debt. I think it is safe to assume that no one would be able to or probably would even want to buy this family for three billion dollars, so all hearing this story would, of course, realize that this king is going to take a loss (a king sized bath if you will) on this debt. But what options does the king have? There is no way he is going to collect. The servant does offer to pay. He asks the king to "be patient with me and I will pay it all back". This is an absurd offer. But the king takes pity on him and forgives the debt. The king could have sold the family or used them as slaves for their whole life. It would not have even put a dent in their debt, but it would have made more sense than forgiving the debt all together. It is

here that we get the first idea of a kingdom value. Forgiveness is not rational. It will NEVER make sense. What makes sense (to us) is to extract what someone owes you. If they don't have enough, then you take all they have. If someone hurts us, we hurt them back! Allowing someone to hurt us and then doing nothing in return defies reason. But, in the kingdom our king has done just that. Giving His only son to such a scandalous, spectacular, and painful death so we could have restored fellowship with Him is not rational. God did not just cancel our debt, He paid it for us through the sufferings of His son, Jesus. It does not make sense why our king would do that. In this parable Jesus is making the same illustration. I believe His hope is that we will see that element of this story.

Of course the story does not end here. The servant goes directly out and finds a fellow servant who owes him a hundred denarii. In today's currency this would be equal to \$5000 dollars. It is a lot of money, but a sum that could conceivably be paid back over time. The fellow servant offers to his loan shark friend the exact same deal that he offered his king before. This time, the unjust servant did not forgive the fellow servant as the king had forgiven him, but threw him in jail. Now THIS makes sense. Man "A" puts man "B" in jail because man "B" owes man "A" money and, as we all know, there are vast sums of money to be made IN JAIL! We can only imagine what kind of thoughts drove this

behavior. If you think on it for a minute, you might be able to string together a depraved line of thinking that actually justifies this action. We all do it everyday. The nature of man is keen on finding creative ways to get what it wants ... MINE, MINE, MINE.

The way of Jesus is different than that. God wants us to value others more than money. He wants us to put relationships above material wealth or comfort. The apostle Paul in a letter to the church at Philippi encouraged them to “share in the sufferings of Christ”. I believe that this means that we are to lay our lives down for the sake of others just as Christ laid his life down for us. It means we forgive others even when they do not deserve it. It means we obey the spirit of God even when it means sacrificing my comfort. It means that I empty myself so that others will be filled. This could be as simple as a smile to a check out clerk at a grocery store, as painful as giving a kidney or even giving one’s only son.

### **600000:1 Debt Ratio**

The other servants see the man holding this fellow to his debt and they report him to the king. In anger the king orders the man to be tortured. The difference in the two debts was a 600000:1 ratio. The hundred denarii was approximately 2-3 months pay. The 10,000 talents was

164,384 years pay (FYI: most people did not live that long). To look at it another way, if two of us were going to walk out this debt at a dollar a mile, at a 600000:1 ratio at a four mile an hour pace, it would take one of us 15 minutes to walk off the hundred denarii and 17 years to walk off the 10,000 talents debt (without sleeping, bathroom or meal breaks).

When we can come to a level of understanding that the debt others owe us is so infinitesimally small compared to the sacrifice Christ made on the cross to pay ours, then we begin to move toward greatness in the kingdom. It is evidence that we truly embrace the debt that God paid to reconcile our relationship to himself when we give sacrificially to reconcile ourselves to each other. Jim Elliot said it best "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose." Jim and a few of his friends were savagely killed by Aucas Indians in south America while trying to bring the good news of Jesus to them. Jim Elliot, Ed McCully, Roger Youderian, Pete Fleming, and their pilot, Nate Saint all understood the risk when they landed their plane on January 8th 1956 on a sand bank on the Curaray River. They also knew that their lives would be worthless if they did not risk them to bring the light into a darkened world. Those who are great in the kingdom understand that this life is to be expended in the service of the creator of the universe. To give anything less is to waste the potential God gave each of us. In business we call this "leaving cash on the table". Jesus calls us to a life

where we do not leave anything on the table. Jesus held nothing back when he brought your redemption, and he asks us to do the same.

Steve Saint, the son of Nate Saint went back to this Aucas Indian tribe and met the man who savagely killed his father. They began a friendship that continues to this day. Steve learned from his father the real example of forgiveness and forgiving Mincaye (the man who killed his father) was a small gesture compared to the 600000:1 forgiveness he experienced from God. The greatest in the kingdom understand this and walk in it daily.

## Chapter 9: The Laborers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1-16)

### A lesson in God's vision of grace

*Matthew 20:1-16 (New International Version) "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.'*

When I was in my early teens my shop class in school was doing various projects. To participate I had to buy a project kit. My family never seemed to have any "extra" money (a concept that as an adult I fully recognize is a myth), so buying a project kit seemed a bit out of my reach. Nevertheless I asked my dad for five dollars (a fortune to me at that time) to buy a lamp kit. It was the seventies, and the lamp was an orange plastic swag lamp monstrosity. Much to my surprise he gave me the money and I bought the lamp kit. I was so proud of that lamp that I hung it in my room for the longest time. Thankfully, one day, it disappeared, and I can't say I miss it too much. What I remember most about it is that this





was the first time I can recall ever asking for money from my parents for anything where I gave nothing in exchange. Up until that point it was my firm understanding that if we wanted something we had to earn the money for it. We had to do chores around the house or walk the lawn mower up and down the neighborhood streets. This was the first time I can remember ever being given something ... for nothing.

### **Something for Nothing?**

It is this quid-pro-quo (a legal term meaning something for something) mentality that is at the core of this parable. As humans we all tend to see a relationship between giving and getting. If I have a lot of cool stuff (say an orange lamp) it is because I deserve it (i.e. I am good). If I don't have much stuff, it is because I did not deserve it (i.e. I was bad or at least I was not good enough to merit a blessing). In theological terms this is referred to as the Doctrine of Retribution and it is as old as mankind.

In the book of Job, Job loses everything he owns, loses his children and is stricken with painful sores from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet. Jobs "friends" show up to console him. The meat of their council can be summed up in this statement. "Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever

destroyed? As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it. At the breath of God they are destroyed; at the blast of his anger they perish.”

By the time Jesus arrived on the scene such thinking was deeply ingrained in the culture of the time. In John's gospel (9:1-2) it says “As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, "(Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?" Jesus goes on to explain that neither is the case. In Luke 13:1-5 Jesus, when asked about a tragic event where many Jews were slaughtered by the Roman governor, asks them "Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate?“ He goes on to ask "Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? Jesus challenges a way of thinking that was woven deeply into the tapestry of our broken nature. After Job's ordeal God praises Job and condemns his friends. God restores to Job all that was taken from him and more. Jesus heals the blind man and thus brings glory to God. Jesus questions the popular thinking of Jewish history, our history and our present. Do bad things happen to people because they have been bad? Do good things happen to people because they are good? Is God a quid-pro-quo God?

## **Goodness and Eternal Life**

To understand the parable of the laborers in the vineyard we must go back to where this all gets started to set the stage. We have to rewind back to Matt 19:16 to the encounter between Jesus and the rich young ruler. I believe that the exchange between the young man and Jesus is one of the more curious discourses between Jesus and any person in the New Testament. There are many things that stand out in this story. So, let's break them down one at a time.

The young man approaches Jesus and calls him “Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?” (Matt 19:16 NKJV) At this Jesus replies by taking issue with the use of the word “good” and replies with “there is only one who is good”. Jesus is off hand rejecting the notion that goodness=eternal life. Jesus is taking issue with the association of good works and right standing with God. Jesus is attempting to breakdown the Doctrine of Retribution clearly at work in this man's life.

Jesus tells the young man that if he wants to “enter into life” (notice he does not say “eternal life”) that he should “obey the commandments”. The Rich young ruler is asking Jesus what he must do to “earn” eternal life. What does he want that he does not already have? What does he

mean “eternal life”? Of course, the young man is trying to figure out how to live forever. He wants life everlasting and why not, he is young, powerful and wealthy. Who wouldn't want to live forever in those circumstances? But Jesus does not see it the same way. Jesus sees a man who is dead inside. He advises him on how to start living, how to enter life. Maybe we might use a term like “born again”. The young man sees himself as having archived life and wants to secure his position, but Jesus sees a man who has not yet begun to live.

The young man then asks “which ones”? This is not an unusual question as the Hebrew law records 613 commandments called the Mitzvoth. Rabbis over the ages have debated as to which ones are more important or weightier than the others. So, it was not an unusual question for a Rabbi to answer. Jesus threw out six in no particular order. We can only speculate as to why these six. Some believe that Jesus knew that these were the six that the young man struggled with the most, but we cannot know for sure. The young man replied that he had kept those yet still felt lacking. I find this response to be stunning. If the young man had been intentionally deceptive about his keeping of those commandments and still felt lacking, then he would have his explanation and be satisfied. But we must conclude, from his response, that this young man really believed he had kept them. This young man has a profound sense of emptiness that wealth and piety has not been

able to fill. He knows there is more to life and is insistent that Jesus show him the way.

The Bible tells us that this young man is rich. He is a ruler, a person of power and influence. By all standards then and now, he would be judged as “blessed”. Since the young man was still not satisfied with the answer, Jesus gives him the “real” answer. Perfection. Jesus tells the young man to be complete or perfect, sell everything you own and give it to the poor. The young man turns and walks away. The bible says he did this because he had great wealth. Why was it so important for the rich young man or ruler to sell everything and give it away? Why is this the path to perfection in Jesus mind? Why is this the first step in attaining eternal life? He tells His disciples that 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. Why?

### **The God Named Wealth and Power**

A rich man's God is usually his wealth unless subverted to the one true God. Jesus was asking the young man to stop worshiping his position in life and begin to worship God by sharing God's provision with those less privileged. To do this the young man has to set aside the idea that his wealth is a deserved blessing of God and at the same time acknowledge

that those in poverty were not there because God desired for them to be there. In the same way that not all rich people are rich because they deserve it, not all poor people are poor because they deserve it. Some people become wealthy by exploiting those who are weak and powerless. Some people are poor because of bad choices in life. Some people are rich because of circumstance beyond their control. They win the lottery or a rich uncle or parent (the genetic lottery) dies and leaves them a fortune. Even if you work hard and amass a fortune of wealth there is no assurance that you did it alone. If hard work equals wealth 100% of the time, then everyone who worked hard would be wealthy 100% of the time. I know people who live in cracker box houses with tin roofs, no lights, heat or A/C who can (and usually do) out work most Americans on their best day. But, they are not wealthy. I know poor people who are hard workers but are not by many American standards “rich”. I also know people who are lairs, adulterers and thieves that are rich by American measures. So not all bad choices result in poverty. There is no formula for who gets blessed and who does not.

As we examined earlier, in the book of Daniel (Chapter 4), Daniel is warning Nebuchadnezzar that unless he acknowledges God, he will be stricken. One day when walking around his castle he marveled at all he had accomplished and was stricken down. Deuteronomy 8 tells us that

all wealth is from the hand of God and He encourages us time and time again not to forget that fact. But sadly we do.

### **But, What's In It For Me!!!**

Peter, (I can imagine Jesus still stinging from the exchange with the rich young ruler who walked away from eternal life), says "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" In my mind's eye I can see Jesus drop his head in grief. He goes on to explain the distinct and honored role they will play in eternity. But he went back to this notion of the first will be last and the last will be first. He tells them that unless they leave mother and father, brother, and sister that they cannot enter into the kingdom. In Jesus' mind if we stay focused on our own success, if we only look out for number one, then who will look out for those left behind? At this point you may ask yourself "so why doesn't God take care of everyone the same?". And this sets the stage for the parable.

### **Here Is A Clue ... Its Not About The Work At The Vineyard...**

There are a few noteworthy observations to be made about this parable. The landowner hires people throughout the day. First early in the day, possibly sunup around 6am. Next, the third hour, around 9am.

Then, noon, 3pm and the eleventh hour which was the end of the workday somewhere around 5 or 6pm. The landowner agreed to a denarius for the first group which was the customary and fair daily wage. The next group was promised “whatever is right”. The subsequent group was not promised anything specific. If you are a day laborer, you get less and less picky as the day goes on. Also, if you are a day laborer, if you don't work, you (and your whole family) don't eat. Those men hired at the end of the day were obviously not hired to work as the workday had ended. They were hired to be taken care of. They waited to be hired all day and were not. Verse 8 says “when evening came”. Keep in mind that the last group has just arrived as they were hired in the eleventh hour, which is evening time. The landowner paid the last ones hired first and paid them a denarius. He paid the first ones hired what he agreed to ... a denarius.

### **Good News ... Life Is Not Fair.**

The ones hired first grumbled at the landowner. They felt that if people who showed up and did nothing got paid a fair daily wage, then what is to be done for those who actually worked all day? And here in lies the point of Jesus teaching. The landowner represents God. God wants us to bear the burdens of those less fortunate. Why? Because he is God and that is His plan. It does not have to make sense or even be



fair. It is this human, flawed concept of “fairness” that is the problem. If you had gotten everything that you had deserved in life you would likely no longer be allowed to drive a motor vehicle for the rest of your life. You and I have intentionally broken more speed laws than either of us can afford. By the way there is no five mile an hour speed limit tolerance. If you drive 41 MPH in a 40 MPH zone, you’re breaking the law and there are no two ways about it. So, we must get over this idea that life is fair and that we all get what we deserve whether it is a six figure salary or a piece of cardboard with the words “will work for food” scrawled on it. Yes, there is a payoff for hard work ... most of the time. Yes, there are consequences for bad choices ... most of the time. Jesus is appealing to us in this parable to get outside ourselves and see that God loves all of His creation.

### **God Loves His Creation and Wants You to Join Him in That**

In the book of Jonah God declares his love for Nineveh as “the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?” You and I would be hard pressed to love such a people, but God does. Not because they did good, because they clearly did not. But just because they are a part of His creation. When God answered Job he went on and on about how delighted he was with his own creation. He

delights in you and me. He wants you and me to delight in each other and in all creation as he does. But first we must release our grip on our selfish motives and our “rights” and what is owed to us and what is fair and not fair and do what is right. What is right is to delight in those who are given something for nothing. To participate in giving them something for nothing. We must proudly take our place at the back of the line because we know that when we do we allow someone else (maybe someone not as deserving as us) to be allowed to step up and take a place that maybe they did not deserve. After all, is this not what Jesus did when He laid His life down, so that you and I could take a step forward that we did not deserve. This is what is meant by grace. Unmerited favor of God. It is not just for God to have grace on us (a selfish perspective). Rather, it is His example to us for what He wants us to do for each other. The Kingdom of God is a place where we trip over each other to get to the back of the line so someone else, even the most undeserving, to move forward to the place of honor only to discover that all along the place of true honor was at the end line the whole time.

At the end of the line there is no pressure to perform because you cannot be demoted any lower than the bottom. In the valley there are no high places to fall off of because you are already at the lowest place. When you have nothing left to lose you truly know that you are

sustained by God alone and nothing else. You live on pure, sweet grace  
the way God intended it all along.

## Chapter 10: The King's Wedding Banquet (Matt 22:1-14)

### A lesson in God's Vision of Sovereignty and Protection in a Land That Will be an Everlasting Possession.

*Matthew 22:1-14 (NKJV) And Jesus answered and spoke to them again by parables and said: "The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who arranged a marriage for his son, and sent out his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding; and they were not willing to come. Again, he sent out other servants, saying, 'Tell those who are invited, "See, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and fatted cattle are killed, and all things are ready. Come to the wedding."' But they made light of it and went their ways, one to his own farm, another to his business. And the rest seized his servants, treated them spitefully, and killed them. But when the king heard about it, he was furious. And he sent out his armies, destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city. Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. Therefore go into the highways, and as many as you find, invite to the wedding.' So those servants went out into the highways and gathered together all whom they found, both bad and good. And the wedding hall was filled with guests. "But when the king came in to see the guests, he saw a man there who did not have on a wedding garment. So he said to him, 'Friend, how did you come in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' "For many are called, but few are chosen."*



**Step 1: Take the Familiar, Step 2: Turn it on its Head**

The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. The king represents God and the son represents the Messiah, Jesus. The king wants the guests to come to the party to celebrate the union of his son to his son's bride. Despite the circumstances in this story being about a wedding, oddly the focus is never on the bride or even the groom, but rather the king, his servants, and the guests. We can only assume that there is a bride because it is a wedding feast, because the bride is not even mentioned in this story. We have a groom, the king's son, but this is the extent of his mention in this story, relegating the two most prominent members of a wedding to the shadows.

Traditionally God's bride or wife is a metaphor for God's chosen people, Israel. However, in this story God's chosen people, Israel, are represented by the invited guests and not the bride. The king's servants are the prophets who carried the words of God to Israel through the ages and the second round of invited guests are the gentiles (i.e. non Jews) to whom Israel was to be a light unto (Isa 42:6).

Weddings were, and still are, very significant events. In the first century weddings were a community event. Remember that Jesus' first miracle, turning water into wine, was performed at a wedding. This was noteworthy because the reputation of the families of the bride and groom

were at stake. If a wedding party ran out of wine, it could ruin their reputation in the community for some time to come. Respect and honor were held in great esteem in those days. Wedding rituals were a serious matter, steeped in tradition, symbolism, respect, and honor. Even today the wedding ceremony holds onto many of the ancient traditions and symbols of the ancient era even though we don't make the connection to ancient time. Symbols like the wedding ring, dividing the bride and groom's families to either side of the room and even the bride and groom feeding each other wedding cake and wine (champagne) are all traced back to the ancient wedding ritual. There were traditions and protocols to be observed. Those preparing the wedding took it as serious business as did those who attended. Wedding feasts would likely continue for the entire week. This tradition still continues in parts of the world to this day. In some cultures today the wedding party gets more focus and attention than does the wedding itself.

God considered Israel his bride. Any Jew of the time would have understood that Israel was considered by God to be His bride (Isaiah 54:5-7). Although the relationship was turbulent (at one point God actually divorces Israel v.7) He was always faithful even though Israel was not. God even referred to Israel as an adulterous woman (Ezekiel 16:32). So the language of weddings had deep religious significance for the Jews of this time. However, in this story the bride is not the focus of

attention, but rather the guests. In this story Jesus relates Israel and even the gentiles to the guests and not the bride. Why? We can only speculate that Jesus wanted to draw attention away from the traditional understanding of the wedding and how it related to God and his chosen and wanted them to see themselves in a new light. It seems Jesus is trying to get his fellow Jews to stop thinking about themselves and start thinking about their role in the world and their relationship to God. He wants them to take a step back and not see themselves as the bride, but as subjects of the sovereign God. He does not want them to see a groom, but God the creator of the universe. So, Jesus uses a metaphor that is widely understood and changes it up to bring a fresh understanding of the relationship between God and Israel by shifting the traditional roles around. Jesus' entire ministry seems to be about paradigm shifts and this is a classic approach that Jesus uses often. Take the familiar ... and turn it on its head.

### **The Root of the Problem**

The Jews felt entitled to inherit the kingdom. After all, it was God's promise to Abraham that secured Canaan for the Jews. They felt like they were the heir apparent to this new kingdom established by God. They felt like God was going to crown them. But God wanted the Jews to be the light of the world. God wanted the Jews to introduce God to

the world. But, they did not. To understand the issue deeper from Jesus' perspective, we must role back a few chapters in Matthew (chapter 8) to an encounter Jesus had with a Roman centurion. But first, some background.

Abraham represents to the Jewish people, the father of the faith, the patriarch. Abraham was the father of the promise. God made a covenant with Abraham and his descendants. Issac was the son God promised to Abraham in his old age and the blood line that God designated would inherit the covenant promises. Jacob (later to be called “Israel”), Issac's son, was the patriarch of the nation of Israel. Jacob acquired Esau's birthright through clever maneuvers and trickery. Thus, his twelve sons were the patriarchs of their respective tribes (i.e. the 12 tribes of Israel). David and Jesus trace their heritage back to Jacob's son Judah. Jesus is referred to sometimes as the lion of the tribe of Judah.

Abraham, Issac and Jacob are the fathers of the nation of Israel. They are the fathers of the faith and the head waters of Israel. They represent God's covenant with Israel.

**What was the Covenant?**



- 1) Great nations and kings would come from Abraham
- 2) The covenant would extend to his descendants, but only through the line of Isaac, not Ishmael (Abraham's other son – technically the first born, but not in God's eyes).
- 3) Abraham and his descendants would be given the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession.
- 4) Every male on the eighth day of life was to be circumcised to be considered a part of this covenant.

When Jews identify themselves with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, they are claiming the promise of God established through the covenant between God and Abraham. This covenant promises Israel the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession. To a Jew of Jesus' time, the transaction was a simple one. Those who are descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who were circumscribed on the eighth day were entitled to the land of Canaan. To a first century Jew, the covenant was about land for Israel, pure and simple. The problem is that in Jesus' day, Canaan was possessed by Rome, not Israel. If that was not bad enough, the Jews of Canaan were a people who were ruled over by an oppressive Roman government who routinely executed Jews on crosses as a way to keep them in line and keep the peace (at least as Rome understood peace).

## **Jesus and the Centurion**

In chapter 8 of Matthew, Jesus is confronted by a Roman centurion who acknowledges that Jesus is a "man of authority" and asks him for a favor. Jesus is impressed with his faith and declares to all the Jews gathered around, that he (Jesus) has not witnessed such faith in all of Israel. Given the current circumstances of the Jews, Jesus' declaration must have been like a punch in the gut. But he goes on... he tells the Jews gathered around ... Matthew 8:11-12 (NKJV) And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

When Jesus talks about "reclining at the table" he is referring to a feast or a banquet. Feasts or banquets were used in Hebrew culture as a way to remember the goodness and provision of God. Feasts were used to celebrate the creation of a covenant, as in marriage, as well as to remember covenants of the past. For example, the feast of unleavened bread, or passover, was a feast required by Jewish law to remember the exodus of the Jews from Egypt.

To "recline at the table of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" is a reference to a celebration that many Jews were longing for ... it would recognize the restoration of Canaan as an everlasting possession to the Jews. Imagine you are a Jew in the time of Jesus. You are living under an oppressive Roman rule in a land that was promised to you by God as an everlasting possession. These must have been frustrating circumstances for those Jews. These were the times that tested the faith of the Jews. They were looking for a messiah that would restore Canaan to the Jews and remove the reproach from Israel. What an embarrassment this must have been to the Jews of this day. Why does Jesus make such an outrageous statement?

### **Canaan: The Kingdom of Dirt**

Where the Jews of Jesus' time went wrong was that they identified the covenant as being one of blood descendancy from Abraham. They believed that the fulfillment of the promise God made to Abraham was their own land, soil. But they were wrong. John the Baptist declared to the Pharisees and Sadducee that God could raise up stones to be descendants of Abraham. So if descendancy was not by blood, then what was it? In a word, Faith. If the fulfillment was not soil, then what was it? God promised Abraham a nation and a kingdom. This kingdom was to be like no other. It was to be located in Canaan, but it was not to

be a kingdom of dirt, but of spirit. Not ruled by man (not even Jewish men), but by God. Those who followed God by faith were granted access to the Kingdom of God and those who did not, were not. Therefore, by faith one can enter into this Kingdom of God as the children of the promise extended to Abraham by God located right smack dab in the middle of Canaan whose soil was ruled by the oppressive Roman government. Those who embraced this kingdom and had the faith to enter in, did not find themselves as victims of an oppressive military regime, but found themselves on a higher spiritual realm where God was the king and his domain was the whole world regardless of who possessed the soil. The kingdom of God, the promised land, was to be a spiritual not a physical realm. To put it another way, if you want a physical and temporary kingdom of dirt, you will be subject to the forces of this world (i.e. Rome). If you want to be a part of a spiritual eternal kingdom where God is the king, the physical world may deal you a blow or two, but ultimately God's kingdom is eternal and will last forever.

Remember, God promised Abraham an everlasting possession. Dirt, although long lasting, will not last forever. Based on the laws of thermodynamics, all matter is in a constant and unchangeable state of decay or entropy. Our physical universe as we know it is dying and, at some point will end. God knew this when he promised Abraham a land

as an everlasting possession. I think it is safe to assume that the ancient Jews did not know this and maybe they deserve a pass for a lack of scientific understanding. But, one only need understand the other side of this promise to gain its full benefits, that is that God is faithful to support His end of the covenant no matter what YOU think or believe that covenant to be or not be. Over and over again in the early history of the Jews we see how they attempt to subvert the rule of God and live in open defiance. God, in His long suffering and mercy tolerated and directed His chosen people through the prophets, but nothing seemed to stick. This is the point where Jesus enters the scene.

### **Where's Your Hope?**

The root of the problem seemed to be that the first century Jews were placing their hope on the soil and not God. Sure, they wanted God to send the Messiah, but only to violently evict the cruel oppressors who were making their lives miserable. What God desired from His people was to be His ambassadors to this promised land of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He wanted them to be the light, a beacon of hope in a broken and violent world. The first century Jews had recognized the emperor of the Roman world as their king. A harsh statement you might say? Well, based on what Jesus was trying to communicate to the Jews of his time, I don't think so. Let me explain. Your king is the one who you honor

with your time and energy. This is true whether you love that king or hate him. The authority you fight against or that you loyally serve is the one you recognize as king whether you mean to or not. When you strive against a king of soil, then you are subject to the soil king. But, when you loyally serve and dedicate your devotion to a spiritual king, you are subject only to the king of the spiritual realm. P eriod.

### **Remember the Valley of Elah!**

Remember, David and Goliath. Goliath made the following challenge; 1 Samuel 17:8 He stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel and said to them, "Why do you come out to draw up in battle array? Am I not the Philistine and you servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves and let him come down to me.

David drops by later for a visit and makes this statement; 1 Samuel 17:26 Then David spoke to the men who were standing by him, saying, "What will be done for the man who kills this Philistine and takes away the reproach from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should taunt the armies of the living God?"

Same circumstances but very different points of view. Israel had made Saul their king in every sense. But, David still recognized the

living God as his king. David knew that when you recognize God as the one true king, that there is nothing in this dirt world that can stand against you. He also knew that if Saul is your king, you are in deep, deep trouble, because Saul is a man and men can easily be defeated. As we all probably know, little David killed the giant with a single stone. I often ask people “How many stones does it take to kill a giant?” It is a trick question. The correct answer is: none, you cannot kill a giant with a stone, but God can. By the way, the Jews of Jesus' day knew this story as well. Traditionally, many, if not all, Jewish males had it memorized by the time they were thirteen.

This takes us to the parable. This parable really is two parables or stories in one. Both are significant and communicate a wealth of understanding about the Kingdom of God.

### **Wedding Banquet: Part One**

There is a king who is having a wedding banquet for his son's wedding. Right away most first century Jews would recognize the significance of such an occasion. Even though the text does not specifically say that the invited guests were subjects of the king, it is likely that they were since they were not royalty, they were working class people. These people would have been subject to a king. Since

kings did not routinely socialize with people who were subject to another king, I think it is a safe assumption to recognize that these invited guests were subjects of the king. It is kind of like your boss at work throwing a party and inviting people from the company next door. Surely this happens, but it is the exception, not the rule. When your king throws a party, ALL are expected to come and show their respect and honor the king with their presence. Even to this day, not coming to a party you are invited to without a GOOD reason, is an offense.

However, this story takes a curious turn. In Jesus' story the subjects of the king are too busy come. He invites them a second time and adds that the food is ready and that the fattened cattle have been slaughtered. You have to remember that this is the ancient world. There are no refrigerators. Once you slaughter an animal it had to be cooked and eaten right away. When you slaughter enough fatted cattle to feed a wedding party, you have a lot of meat on your hands. Not only that, but these were fatted cattle. To fatten cattle you have to feed them rich foods and handle them in a certain way. It is safe to assume that this king dedicated significant resources for a significant period of time to make sure these cattle were fat for the party. In referencing this in his second appeal to the invited guests, the king in this story is making it clear that this is not a trivial occasion and one in which the king has invested a great deal of his resources.



At this point of the story things go downhill rapidly. The invited guests (subjects of the king) refuse again. But this time Jesus says that they "went off—one to his field, another to his business. The rest ...". Before we discuss "the rest", I want to draw your attention to how many were referenced before "the rest". One to his field = 1. Another to his business = 1. The sum of which is two people. Two people gave an excuse. THE REST "seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them." It is clear to all who hear this story that those who are in the kingdom of this king are not responding as subjects. The king is not their king and they are not his subjects. They are, in fact, at this point squatters in the king's backyard.

Now depending on the kind of king or lord you are, you either let squatters be as long as they pay taxes and honor the king, or you run them out of the kingdom on a rail. Given that these were violently opposed to the king, in this story Jesus says the king "sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city." The lesson of part one of this parable is really pretty simple. You are only a subject of the king if you are responding appropriately to the king's authority. The Jews believed they were God's chosen people simply because of their descendancy from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But Jesus is telling them, through this story, that subjects of a king are people who recognize the sovereignty of the king of the realm and act accordingly. The message is

clear, honor God (the king) and the power and protection of God will be with you. If you honor the king of dirt (land) or the king of wealth (work or business), you will be subject to all that comes from those (little 'g') gods otherwise known as “idols”. If you assault God or his servants, His power and protection will be turned against you. After all, the servants of this king were also subjects to the king. The right and just thing was for the power of the king to be expressed in a just response to the violent murders of his TRUE subjects. It seems the king was just as interested in seeking justice for those slain in his service as perhaps punishing those who rejected his authority.

## **Part 2 – Meanwhile ... Back at the Party**

The wedding feast has been prepared and there is no other option but to have the party. So, in Jesus' story the king commands his servants to “Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.’ So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.” It is interesting to note that once again Jesus uses the distinction “both good and bad”. Jesus repeats this theme as we have seen many times. Anytime Jesus repeats ideas it is wise to pay close attention. As we have observed in previous passages, this refers to not judging a book by its cover. Jesus wants us to remain neutral when it

comes to classifying people as good and bad. He does challenge us to not judge, but many times tells us to include everyone no matter what you believe about them. It is almost like saying don't judge, but if you cannot make that happen, just include everyone even the ones you insist on labeling as “bad”. Ultimately God will be the judge of all as we will see here next.

Jesus continues his story, “But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. 'Friend,' he asked, 'how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless.” Many scholars believe that, especially in large wedding parties, that the guests of this time period were required to wear a special garment that signified that they were a part of the wedding party. I guess the first century had their share of wedding crashers. This is what we do know, the king noticed a guest without wedding clothes. Therefore, all were apparently expected to have them. The king inquired how a person without them could even get in. Therefore, entrance to the party was apparently prohibited without it.

Reason tells us that if ALL were invited and a wedding garment was required for entrance, that such a garment was no doubt provided to ALL. Since wedding garments were a big deal in that time, we can safely assume that the guest was most likely wearing it when he entered

the party and removed it after being granted access. Or, he somehow dodged the servants at the entrance who were making sure all were properly dressed for the occasion. Either way the guest without wedding garments was showing contempt for the wishes of the king. So here we have another example of a subject that was not really a subject at all and showed the king great disrespect. As a result, the servants were instructed to 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' Notice that this is the same phrase Jesus used when talking to the Jewish crowd when Jesus encountered the Roman centurion.

## **Who is Your King?**

Why two parts of this story? Part one clearly is being addressed to God's chosen people, the Jews. He is trying to get them to see that they are not acting like God's chosen people and in fact, at times, even appear to be enemies of God. Jesus' message to them is that God will not be mocked. If the Jews believe God is their King, then they should act accordingly. Otherwise, they will find themselves subject to whatever power they subject themselves to. If you live by the sword (like "THE REST" referred to earlier in this story) you will die by the sword. If you live by the land you will die by the land. If you live by business, you will die by business. If you live by God, you will die by God. In all

circumstances of life it all ends the same way ... death. No matter what God/King you choose to serve you will ultimately die in their arms. Jesus' story about the kingdom of God is desperately trying to call all, first God's chosen, then to the gentiles, that He is king of the realm where ultimate power and authority reign. He is crying out to them to not get caught up in the circumstances that are in their faces, but to look beyond them to a God who is faithful and just and wants to save and protect us. Dying in the arms of God is like living forever ... in an everlasting possession.

Whenever Jesus speaks of the Jews, we must remember that He is speaking to God's chosen people. He is speaking to those who God selected to be the light of the world. Since Jesus extended the promise to the gentiles, we now find ourselves in the same place as the Jews. By following Christ, we accept the extension of the promise God made to the Jews that now includes us. If we do not take careful measures, we will marginalize Christ and live a life of faithlessness and disobedience. The Jews thought they were entitled to the Kingdom of God and therefore took it for granted. They missed the part where they were to make a contribution, not to earn God's favor, but to show reverence and respect for the God of the universe. Some of the Jews felt like they could provide everything they needed by the power of their will and the strength of their hands. They missed the part where God told them that

everything comes from the hand of God. Some Jews thought they could please God by being good and shunning those who they deemed were bad. They missed the part where God called on them to do good in the name of God and live a life of righteous devotion to the call of healing creation. To be a part of the Kingdom of God you must prepare yourself and cloth yourself in the righteousness of Christ. His righteousness was based on service to God by serving others whether they deserve it or not. The question Jesus asks us in this parable is this, which guest are you? The one who does not care? The one who pushes God aside? Or, the one who shows up but makes no effort to show honor to God? Or, the one who is clothed in the righteousness of Christ and has decided to die in His arms and live forever in the land of promise, a land that is an everlasting possession.

## Chapter 11: The Ten Virgins (Matt 25:1-13)

### A Lesson in God's Vision of Urgency and Partnership in Completing the Mission.

*Matthew 25:1-13 (NKJV) "Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish. Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. "And at midnight a cry was heard: 'Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!' Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise answered, saying, 'No, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.' And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut. "Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open to us!' But he answered and said, 'Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.' "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.*



Jesus once again uses the wedding as a backdrop for a kingdom parable. The wedding is a symbol of unity and completeness. It was first ordained in the book of Genesis, in order to complete the man who was created first, with the addition of the woman. Separately they were incomplete, but together they were whole and complete. Israel is often referenced, by God, as His wife. The marriage between husband and

wife is a powerful picture of God's relationship to us (the Church). In the book of Revelation, the Church is considered the bride of Christ and when Jesus returns it speaks of a wedding between Jesus (the groom) and the Church (the bride). Weddings were, and still are, viewed as a time of renewal and redemption, when the two become one, new and forgiven entity. So, as you can see, the wedding, in Jesus' time as in our own, has deep and meaningful spiritual significance. We must understand its significance if we are to extract the principles from this parable.

## **Jewish Weddings 101**

To get the full meaning of this parable you must first get familiar with the Jewish wedding customs. There are many subtle yet meaningful aspects of it, but we are only going to hit the highlights as they relate to the story Jesus is telling.

The groom's father makes and approves the choice of the bride. In traditional Jewish customs, marriages were arranged by their fathers. It is quite often that the Bride and Groom had never even seen one another before they were engaged. Once a bride and bridegroom enter into this initial phase of marriage (called betrothal), they are considered married. To break the engagement at this point, they would have to get a divorce,



called a "get" to break off the engagement. Even though the couple is engaged they are not to have a physical relationship nor do they live together. The Groom makes a covenant promise witnessed by two people and at which point is binding and the couple are considered married. The newlywed couple would drink a cup of wine to seal the covenant. When the bride drinks from the cup after the bridegroom it is a sign that she is accepting the covenant. The Groom would pay a price for his bride. Today we exchange wedding rings. The Groom would give a speech of promise to his bride that he would come and claim her soon. This is the engagement promise. The Groom then goes to prepare a bridal chamber. He works on it until it pleases his father. Then he may go after his bride. The blushing bride may wait for up to two years for the bridegroom to come and claim her. During this time the Bridesmaids (unmarried friends) attend to the bride and provide light for the groom who comes at night. It is a traditional custom for friends to light the processional or during the veiling ceremony to represent the presence of God, the Shekinah Glory. When the bridegroom comes the groomsmen would run ahead of the groom sounding the Shofar and shouting that "he is coming!" While the father's head was turned, the groom would "steal" the bride. The wedding party then went back to the groom's house to meet the guests. The bride and groom then enter the bridal chamber where the marriage is consummated. The party waits

outside until the groom tells the best man that it is consummated. Then, the guests rejoice for seven days.

## **What is So Special About the Number 10?**

In the Jewish wedding custom, there is no designation as to how many attendants the bride is to have. Therefore, there must have been some other explanation regarding the number of bridesmaids. If the number of bridesmaids is not significant, then why would Jesus have been so specific? In the study of biblical numbers called biblical numerology, we know that there are a few perfect numbers that typically represent God or spiritual things. The number one represents God. Three represents the Trinity (the Father, Son and Holy Spirit). Seven is also a perfect number. God rested on the seventh day and there are seven candle holders in the lamp stand of the tabernacle. Ten is also a significant number. Whereas 3, 7 and 12 represent the perfection of God, 10 represents a human completeness. Abram waited ten years to have a baby with Sarai before taking Sarai's maidservant and having a child with her. Ten is the minimum number of righteous that would have saved the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Ten is the number of days that Rebekah's mother and brother wanted her to stay with them before Abraham's servant took her away to be Isaac's wife. Laban changed Jacob's wages ten times before he confronted Laban about it. Nine was

not to much of an imposition, but eleven was absolutely unacceptable! During the famine in Israel, ten of Joseph's eleven brothers came to Egypt seeking provisions. These are just a few examples from the book of Genesis. Some other notable uses of ten; the ten commandments, ten is a prominent measure in the specifications of the temple, Gideon used ten men to tear down the alter to Baal and the Ashra pole in Median, David took ten loaves of bread and ten cuts of cheese to his brothers who were being challenged by Goliath. Ten days was the test period for Nebuchadnezzar to evaluate the Hebrew diet requested by Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego while exiled in Babylon. Ten is the percentage to be given as a provision for the Levities according to the law. On and on it goes. Ten represents a fullness of measure from a human perspective. Less than ten is not quite considered “full” and more than ten is usually considered more than enough. Ten represents wholeness from a human perspective, but not perfection. So when Jesus uses the number ten to represent the bride's attendants it is meant to communicate that those who were attending to the bride were, as a group, complete. The ten, in this illustration, represents all of humanity.

### **Meanwhile, Back at the Wedding ...**

The unmarried friends of the bride would tend to the bride until the groom came. By relating Israel (the Church) to the bridesmaids as

opposed to the bride, Jesus is, once again, trying to get Israel to see themselves in a new role as the stewards or attendants of renewal and not merely the benefactors of renewal. God wanted Israel to bring light for others to see, not simply to light only their own world. It appears, at first, that all ten bridesmaids were the same. The difference was their preparation. Those who had properly prepared were wise and the ones who did not properly prepare were labeled foolish.

### **A Word About the Lamp and the Oil**

There is much debate about the symbols of the lamp and the oil. To some, the lamp and the oil symbolize the Holy Spirit. However, there are many problems with applying the text in that way. First, all the bridesmaids had oil. Only the wise purchased extra oil. Although some texts indicate the foolish took “no oil”, later the text does say that the lamps for the foolish were “going out”. How can a lamp with “no oil” go out? The simple answer is that it cannot. All the lamps had oil. The wise bridesmaids purchased extra oil. Therefore, oil in this context cannot represent the Holy Spirit because God's presence is not quantifiable. You either have it, or you do not. You don't have a little of the presences of God, and you cannot have more of God's presence than someone else. It is like having a friend who is a little bit with you. Your friend is either present or they are not. The other problem with this

application of the oil as representing God's presence is that the foolish virgins, after running out, went to buy more oil. You cannot acquire more of God's presence. As indicated before, God is either with you or He is not. So, what does the lamp and the oil mean in this story. Well, like the parable of the king's wedding banquet, the oil and the lamp are analogous to the wedding garments to be worn by the guests. They are simply a part of a standard cultural ritual. As mentioned earlier, the lamp and oil did represent, in the ancient wedding ritual, the presence of God, but in this story, they only represent a component part of a traditional wedding ritual. In other words, the focus of the story is not the lamp or the oil, but the preparation for the wedding ritual in which the lamp and the oil were an integral part. In the same way that wearing wedding garments were an expected preparation for a wedding banquet, having enough oil for the wedding ritual was also considered proper and expected preparation.

### **Real Friend or Impostor Friend?**

The core principle at the heart of this story is respect expressed in the form of proper and appropriate preparation. Our actions, works or fruit are an outward expression of an inward state. You can tell me you are my friend. I can tell you that I am your friend. As your friend, for example, I may agree to pick you up from the airport. If I don't arrive to

pick you up, then you really have to wonder if I am really your friend or not. A true friend would respect you. Part of respect is putting such a high value on that person that you would do anything to not let them down. I am always surprised at those who say things like “xyz is very important to me, but I am just so busy with abc, that I don't have time...” People always make time for the things that are most important to them. I know what you are probably thinking “sometimes people just forget”. This is true, but forgetful people should make appropriate provisions for their forgetfulness by employing tactics that help them to remember. What is most important to you? I will tell you. Whatever you spend time on. If you spend your precious time on something, it is important to you. If it pushed something else out, then that thing (that is pushed out) was not as important as the things you actually made time for. When we respect others and hold them in high esteem, the actions that accompany such esteem will also be manifest. Hebrew celebrations and rituals were such opportunities to express honor and value to fellow humans. Remember the wedding banquet that the king hosted. The offense committed by the attender was that he was not wearing proper wedding attire. Thus, showing contempt for the host. In the same way, those who are attending the bride are expected to light their lamps when the bridegroom arrives and to light the parade route to the wedding feast. To not do such would show great contempt for the groom. When, in the parable, the groom tells the foolish virgins” I don't know you” is the

same thing as telling them “Talk to the hand”. It is not as much that he did not know them as that he was deeply hurt by their contempt and lack of respect. Much in the same way you would if someone cavalierly ignored an even seemingly small detail of your life that was important to you. They would probably not be your enemies, but their friendship would certainly come into question. You might even catch yourself in a private thought thinking something like “I wonder if they even know me or care about me at all?”

### **Sleep. Sometimes Just Means ... Sleep.**

“The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.” Sleep, in the Bible, can mean rest, spiritual apathy or death. Since both the wise and the foolish fell asleep I think it is safe to rule out spiritual apathy. This may reference physical death (falling asleep) to be followed by resurrection (the wedding party) when Jesus (the Bridegroom) returns. When the Shofar sounds, and they are awakened, will they be ready to light the processional?

### **The Doors are Closing Even Now, are You Ready?**

In studying the Bible, one must always consider the context of a passage to fully understand it's meaning. This parable begins with the

phrase “at that time...” This indicates that the parable starting in chapter 25 is a continuation of what was going on at the end of chapter 24. Remember, the original text is not broken up by chapter and verse. Men added those much later. There is nothing inspired about chapter breaks in the Bible so don't let them throw you as you study God's word. At the end of chapter 24 Jesus is speaking of the last days in what is known as the “Olivet Discourse”. He warns His disciples of times to come of gloom and doom. In graphic detail he lays out a gruesome and horrifying scene of violence and suffering. This discourse is the lead in for this parable describing the kingdom at the end of this age. Not too long after Jesus' death and resurrection the Church was to be persecuted just as Jesus had warned.

In C.S. Lewis' book the Screwtape Letters, two demons exchange letters about causing havoc in the lives of Christians. The “Enemy” they refer to is God. The younger demon, Wormwood, has declared to his uncle, Screwtape, victory in that he has discouraged a Christian, the target of his attacks. Uncle Screwtape offers this reply:

*“Hence the prayers offered in the state of dryness are those which please Him best He wants them to learn to walk and must therefore take away His hand; and if only the will to walk is really there He is pleased even with their stumbles. Do not be deceived*



*Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy's will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys."*

And it is with us as it is with the bridesmaids. Are we ready when the call comes forth that the bridegroom is coming? Once you hear the call it is too late, the time for preparation has ended. The bridegroom wants true friends, not Johnnie-come-latelys who are just there for the cake and punch. The wedding is more than a party. It is the fulfillment of the promise. It is the beginning of Shalom where we all join together in perfect unity for all eternity. It is the culmination and realization of the vision of God, the ultimate objective, the end game. He desires that we all join with him in celebration on that day. He wants to celebrate with those who love the restoration and redemption of this broken world as much as He does. If you are not ready for that day, then you are like a person who forgot to pick up a "friend" at the airport. The doors will close and He will say "I'm sorry, but I don't know you."

So now I address the reader directly. You may be reading this and have a sense that you may not be ready when the call comes. Maybe you know there is not enough oil in your lamp. Maybe you don't even

have a lamp. There is a remedy. All you need to do is acknowledge who Jesus is. He is the son of God, the perfect lamb who has taken away the sins of the world. As His friend, join with Him in His mission to redeem this broken world. Get to know Him by reading about Him, talk to Him as if He were your friend (prayer). Listen to Him. He speaks in a still small voice, he speaks through all creation, He speaks through others. If you stop, quiet yourself and incline your ear, you will hear Him. Once you hear Him, do what He says (repentance). His voice calls us to contend against the brokenness all around us and within us. Once you have made this decision, you need to seek out and find another believer and share your experience with them, Christianity is not for lone rangers. Jesus was very clear about this. The Kingdom of God is a kingdom of community, not a private one. And I am honored to be the first to welcome you to the Kingdom. *Welcome to the party!*

## Chapter 12: Parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14-30)

### A Lesson in God's Vision of Stewardship

*Matthew 25:14-30 (NKJV) "For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey. Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. And likewise he who had received two gained two more also. But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord's money. After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them. "So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, 'Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.' His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.' He also who had received two talents came and said, 'Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.' His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.' "Then he who had received the one talent came and said, 'Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours.' "But his lord answered and said to him, 'You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to him who*



*has ten talents. 'For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'*

To better understand this story, think of the master as the employer (the “boss”), think of the slaves as employees. The boss gave assignments to each of the three. The assignment was that the boss entrusted some of his “stuff” to each of them, but not in equal shares, in amounts that the boss knew each was capable of handling. Then, he went on a trip. That is, in fact, how we know he was the boss, because he gave orders and then left town. It's good to be the king!

The real story is what happens next. The two employees with five and two “stuffs” went out immediately and doubled it (double stuff ... yummm). The one with one “stuff” buried it in the ground. When his boss came back, he could only return what had been entrusted to him. You might ask, “Well, how should the guy with one item have known what to do, and how is it that the other fellows knew what to do?” The one fellow with the muddy “stuff” confessed that he knew what was expected of him and ... ignored the request. The others also knew which is why they wasted no time doing what was expected of them and what they were fully capable of doing.

## **The Grim “Repo Man”**

I must come clean right here and now. I am a reality TV junkie. Now as a purist I don't go in for that contrived reality, where you stick twenty people in a room (or on an island) and watch while they eliminate each other. I like the shows where they follow around real people being themselves. Whether you are watching guys catch king crab or hot rod enthusiasts racing for titles, there is something entertaining about watching real people in extraordinary circumstances that captures my attention. One of my favorite shows is one where the viewer gets to follow around a repo team while they repossess vehicles. Some of these people I feel for. Some of them have obviously fallen on hard times and now their lot in life is made worse by the fact that their auto is being towed away. Some, on the other hand, exercised very poor judgment in either buying a car they could not afford or in thinking they could get away with not paying the finance company for the vehicle.

However, they all have one thing in common ... they ALL claim to have made the payments. I'm sure this happens on occasion, but I am stunned at the consistency of the pleas to the repo man to drop the car because "we made the payments". How is this possible? What is even more astounding to me is that all of these people tell the repo man, in so many words, to "leave my car alone". My car! My car? That's right "my car". I have never once heard a person say to the repo man "Hey!

Put down the finance company's car!". It is strange isn't it that we can go to a car lot, sign some papers, drive off the lot with a \$5,000 - \$40,000 vehicle with little, or no, cash up front, and claim that it is OUR vehicle. What an odd phenomenon.

The phenomenon is probably mostly at home here in America where this happens so much that we don't even think twice about it. The lines between ownership and management become so blurred that we see people in the news taking unprecedented liberty with stuff that is ... not theirs. We see stories of fraud and embezzlement that make our heads spin. We see corporate executives take unfathomable amounts of cash out of the companies they work for. The stories of government mismanagement of public funds are legendary. What do all these things have in common ... all of them were managers acting like owners. We see this so much in our own culture that we tend to become desensitized to it and, more importantly, we tend to do the same. Our culture has adopted an ownership mentality and has all but abandoned the concept of stewardship. Take heart though; this is not a new problem. It is as old as Adam and Eve.

**Owner or Manager?**

How do you know if you are an owner or a manager? The test is simple. Do you have full control over what is in your possession? I had a friend of mine that asked to borrow my lawn mower. I told him yes, but he could not take it off my property. Clearly owners have control. Like those unfortunate souls who lost their vehicles to the repo man, they were not really owners because they did not have control. If all your creditors decided to call in your debts today, what would you have left? If that happened to many Americans, they would be financially ruined.

What about the stuff you own that you bought with your hard-earned money? You deserve it because you worked hard for it right? Remember back in chapter 9 (The Laborers in the Vineyard). I know people who work VERY hard and don't have two nickels to rub together. They make good choices, they work hard but their “ship has not come in” as we Americans like to say. So hard work alone is not a guarantee that one will own lots of stuff. Sloth and making bad choices are conversely not a guarantee of failure or hard times. Some call it luck. The Bible calls it God's provision, or in simple terms ... a gift. We work hard because that is what is expected of all of us. God provides for you because you are a sacred and a delightful creation like the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. You have because God loves you and He wants to take care of you.

## **The Pink Elephant Speaks!**

As we pointed out in chapter 9 with the question “why doesn't God take care of everyone the same?” The faulty assumption with this thinking is that God will always provide to each of us directly. As we have already learned about the Kingdom of God, God desires that we partner with Him in the restoration and building of the Kingdom. He wants us to contend against the brokenness of this world. All the Bible can be summed up with the two pillars of: love God and love others. God wants you and me to love each other just as much as He loves you and me. It is not a stretch to think that part of this process is to provide for the needs of others by giving to us and allowing us to, in turn, give to them.

When my children were infants, they were not able to buy gifts for their mother at Mother's Day. This is a true tragedy. Think of all those years when their mother was working harder than ever to raise them and they were unable to express gratitude because they were unable to drive to the store. Even if they could drive to the store, sadly they had no money to buy gifts. Don't worry. I took them to the store and I paid for the gifts they wanted to buy. Now why would I do this? Mostly because my wife would not be fit to live with if I told her the kids could not drive



and had no money of their own. What a bunch of free loaders! But, I also love my wife and appreciate her service to our family and also want to express my gratitude. I enabled my children to express love to their mother. I provided for them to express gratitude to their mother on Mother's Day much in the same way that God provides, through us, to those in need of provision (which by the way is ALL of us).

It reminds me of the old story where a person is trapped on the roof of his house during a flood. Let's call that person "Bob". Bob prayed that God would deliver them from certain death. Bob had great faith and waited for God to provide. Soon a boat came by and offered rescue. Bob said "I am waiting on God, He will delivery me, just wait and see.". Later another boat comes by with a similar offer. Again, the roof bound Bob declined in lieu of rescue by God. After a while a helicopter came over the roof and dropped a line to the Bob. He waved off the helicopter indicating he is waiting for God to rescue him. Bob drowned and went to visit with St. Peter. Bob was distraught that God had not rescued him. St. Peter replied "What do you mean? We sent two boats and a helicopter!". God's provision can (and does) come in a variety of ways and through a variety of people. Has God's provision been delivered through you? If not, should it have been? Could it have been? Do we just assume that all we possess belongs to us and can/should be used solely for our own benefit? Do we size our lifestyle to match God's

provision, or do we seek to live humbly and simply in order that others can have a comparable humble and simple lifestyle. Is our culture geared to consume every ounce of God's provision leaving only a meager fraction for others? Do you think that is what God intended? Do we see ourselves as owners or managers?

### **It's Funny Sometimes How Ownership Looks Like Stealing ... (not funny HA HA)**

If I feel I am doing a good job at work and through my hard work and dedication, my employer has accumulated massive profits, is it OK for me to write myself a check for a portion of those profits? I sincerely hope you think that this is a ridiculous idea and unthinkable. But, there are those who, on some scale, think and feel this way. Some justify taking paper clips, notepads or pens from the office. They think that the office will not miss such a small amount of supplies. After all, we work hard here and rarely ever get the nod we deserve. A box of pens is a small consideration for the thankless job we do. Sound familiar? This is an owner's mentality. Here is how the logic plays out; if I perceive that the owner had not compensated me for the work I performed, that enriched him, then I am rightly the owner of the product I was not compensated for. Therefore, I will take my payment in the form of stuff, coming in late, leaving early or taking a long lunch. Because, after all, I

have got to be compensated for my product. This thinking is NO different than going to your bosses check book and writing a check for the equal value of whatever liberties you have exercised. Even the smallest amount is unthinkable, but many of us (myself included) have done it without as much as a thought about it. We act like owners. We act as though we have control over small amounts of other people's stuff.

The truth is, we are not owners. We are managers. The bible uses the term “stewards” which means the same as manager. A manager acts on behalf of the owner. When you are a manager, you do NOT control how money and resources are allocated. The owner decides and the manager makes it happen. Some managers have more authority to make decisions than others, but at the end of the day, they all must answer for their actions to ... you guessed it, the owner. Everything comes from the hand of God. That makes God the owner of everything. We (ALL of us) are the managers. We have authority to make God's desires happen, but at the end of the day, we must answer to the owner. The owner answers to no one. If you feel you are the owner, then you don't even answer to God!

**Join the Management Team ... or else!**

Many years ago I expressed to a friend that I was worried that my job might get in between me and my relationship with God. He leaned forward, looked me straight in the eye and told me “Don't worry, if it does, He will take it away!”. Wow! What a shot between the eyes. It sounds harsh, but my friend was 100% correct. What my friend lacks in tact, diplomacy and grace, he tends to make up for in wisdom. God is more concerned about our relationship with Him and others than He is with any “thing” on earth. If you are still convinced you are the owner, brace yourself! God may want to show you otherwise in a most vivid and personal way. Not to hurt you, but to bring you back to Him. Trust me friend, as an owner, God can't be beat. It's in your best interest to get behind the one who owns the cattle on a thousand hills.

### **Oh Yeah, There is a Parable to be Discussed.**

The third guy who buried his boss's stuff in the ground was acting like an owner. He knew what was expected, had the ability to do it, but just simply refused. This is owner behavior. On the other hand the first two employees, did what they knew was expected and were capable to perform. Was there any guarantee of their success? In a matter of speaking there was. For years I have been troubled with the thought that I wished Jesus had included one person in this story that tried to do what the employer asked, but failed. It finally dawned on me that when you

are doing what God asks, with what God has given you, you cannot fail! Strong statement? Right now, all the things you think God has asked you to do, that you believed you were capable of doing, where you failed are running through your mind like some bad movie trailer. STOP! There are two very strong possibilities; 1) you were wrong that God was calling you to do that thing, or 2) you were wrong about what God was trying to accomplish. What looks like failure to you and me, may very well have served God's purposes. God may call you to a job, a job that you are capable of performing and even though you are doing the best you can, you get sacked (fancy English term for getting fired). Could it be that you learned something that could only have been learned by getting fired? Could it be that you provided some service to someone and now God needs you elsewhere? Is it possible that somehow, someway that what looks like failure to you can be redeemable in an eternal context?

Maybe you or someone you have encountered has been enriched by this experience. In that case, you have not failed. In the same way that we are not qualified to judge “good” or “bad” people, we are not qualified to judge success or failure. To do so, we would need to know what God knows of every situation and every circumstance. What seems like success to us, to God, may be supreme failure. What seems like failure to us, to God, may be supreme success. Proverbs 14:12 says

“There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.” So be cautious about labeling the outcome of any thing as a “success” or a “failure”. I am confident that if we try to hear God and do what we think He wants us to do, with what He has given us to work with, that we WILL succeed, even in the muck of what appears to be, from a human perspective, magnificent failure! The guarantee we have from God, is that if we understand this concept, and act on it (which is the essence of faith) we will not fail.

### **Zooming Out a Bit.**

We must remember the context of this story. Jesus is talking about the end times. Remember that the Jews are God's chosen people, the light of the world. God has selected Israel to let the whole world know about the one true God, the God of Abraham, Issac and Jacob, the God of provision, healing and protection. The God of love and justice. But, historically Israel has not met the challenge. Like the employees who were entrusted with the employer's stuff, Israel acted like the one who buries his employer's stuff in the dirt. Israel should have been like those who went out and doubled up. God desired for Israel to go out and show off their God and invite others to come along on the ride. Instead, they treated their “chosen” status as an exclusive club where only those related to Abraham can join. What a great gift Israel possessed, and

instead of trading on it to expand the Kingdom, they buried it in the dirt. They did not fully appreciate what they had, how God had prepared them and what the true mission was. They acted like owners. But, at the end of the day, ALL of them had to answer to the “Boss”. The Kingdom of God is a place where God (the Boss) desires to bring in as many as will catch the vision of Shalom and take on the mission of restoring this broken world. The end game is a new heaven and a new earth. The new earth is one where there is no death and no pain for all eternity. Many things on this side of eternity are not going to make the transition. Some things will, those are the things that God entrusts to us. He gives us resources (abilities) to build His Kingdom. He waits for us to invest our redeemed lives into the lives of others and thereby build the Kingdom. Sadly, many of us will insist on using the abilities God has given us to “feather our own nests” rather than invest in the Kingdom. It's not too late to make a change, to repent and be like those who the master said “well done ... enter into the joy of your master”. You have a guarantee of success, but you must act on it now.

## Chapter 13: God's Plan from the Beginning

God's vision from the beginning was to create a dwelling place for you and I. A place where we would walk with Him in the cool of the day. The Garden of Eden was such a place. But, not long after moving in, mankind demonstrated that they were not yet ready. This was not a shock to God, He knew this before He laid the foundations of the universe.



Since God was not surprised, then we can only assume that His plan from the beginning was to work with mankind throughout history to make us into the kind of people He desired to fellowship with for all eternity. This plan, which includes all human history, is the method by which God will accomplish His final work. God's final work is the vision He had from before the first moments of creation. God saw the completed work before He started it much in the same way that an artist envisions a painting while the canvas is still blank. In the same way a mother dreams of the possibilities for her unborn child. Will he cure cancer? Will she be President? What will the painting of our life look like when the master artist has finished. We don't know, but a master painter sees the finished work before he touches the brush to the canvas.



What does this picture look like? It is a living tapestry made up of many different threads all woven into a pattern that resembles the one who created us. We together look like our father. It should come as no surprise that even creation itself gives us clues to God's plan.

We give birth to young ones who grow up to look and act similar to ourselves. As we mature we desire to find a mate, a partner who will complete us. We, in a small way, live out God's vision without even being aware of it. As we consider the history of God and His people, as we examine and meditate on the teachings of Jesus, we get a clue, a faint image of what is to come. It looms over human history like a shadow. The ancients called this vision, this ultimate panacea ... Shalom.

Shalom, which in English is translated peace means far more in Hebrew than it's English counterpart. In English, peace is the absence of conflict. But, in Hebrew is represented as a wholeness and completeness that was perfect. Shalom represents a wholeness of mind, body and soul. Shalom was a symphony where all creation works together as a single unbroken unit. Where all parts played in perfect tempo and pitch. I like to sing and play music. I would not call myself a musician, but I like to think of myself as a worshipper. What I like best about worship in a congregational setting, is that special something that one feels when all are singing in unity, the same song, in the same key (at least most of

us are). There is a feeling that rises up in me that I cannot fully describe. Growing up I sang in choir. To this day a choir can bring me to tears. It is this scene of harmony and unity that I think is the closest model, this side of eternity, of Shalom. In Shalom, there is no one singing off key. Every note is delivered in proper time and pitch. Everyone in the choir ceases to be an individual and quickly becomes a single unit operating as one to make beautiful music that cannot be achieved by any other method using even the most sophisticated technology. In Shalom, we all operate in perfect community. It is this vision of Shalom that I think God had in mind all along.

God desires for us to practice Shalom here and now, not there and later. Jesus taught us "...Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven..." We are to live now, like we plan on living then. We do live in a broken world, but we have the power that raised Christ from the dead to aid us. Jesus told us that He would send a helper. The Holy Spirit is that helper. The Holy Spirit guides us to live a way that does not come naturally to us. The Holy Spirit empowers us with the strength to overcome the brokenness we and others experience. In the Kingdom of God parables, Jesus is laying out a blueprint of God's end game and how we can be a part of it.

The word Gospel means “good news”. The good news is that Jesus came to save that which was lost. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that who so ever would believe on Him would not perish, but have everlasting life. Before Jesus, we were lost in our own selfish ways. We were lost in our own brokenness. We were subject to damaging others and being damaged by the brokenness of others. Jesus came to tell us that we don't have to live this way. He came to show us a better way. The way of Shalom. The way of unity, harmony and wholeness. We are broken, but we don't have to live that way. We live in a broken world. A world full of pain, war, greed, violence, death, decay and destruction. If that makes you sad, then hallelujah!!! It makes God sad as well. It also means that this broken world is not what you were made for. I Peter 2:9 says “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” In C. S. Lewis' book Mere Christianity he says “If we discover a desire within us that nothing in this world can satisfy, also we should begin to wonder if perhaps we were created for another world.” In John 16:33 Jesus says "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." In this life you will experience the pain of brokenness, you will have your heart

broken by those who themselves are just as broken as us. But this life, as James tells us, is but a vapor, here for a second, and then gone.

The next life will last for all eternity. That life, I imagine, is like this life without the brokenness, death and decay. Imagine a world where nothing dies. There is no death. Since there is no death, then creatures on our earth that manage death, like maggots, are no longer needed. Think of all the creatures on earth that are here only to manage death and decay. In the new heaven and earth ... gone. Imagine a flower garden where the flowers never die and grow only where you want them. Imagine not having allergies. If you sit back and let your mind go crazy, the possibilities are endless and wonderful. This is the world you and I were created for. This is the vision of God.

Every chapter contained a sub-title. Listed below are those sub-titles. As you review them, remember the content of each in the light of these final thoughts and see if you can catch the vision of God. Then, go out and build the Kingdom of God.

- Vision of a New World of Harmony and Restoration
- Vision of a New World of Pervasive Love in Humility and Persistence
- Vision of a New World of Worship Through Community

- Vision of the Value of the New World
- Vision of Building the New World through Faith, Self-Denial and

Service

- Vision of Balance in the New World
- Vision of Greatness in the New World
- Vision of God's Sovereignty and the Everlasting Nature of the New

World

- Vision of Grace in the New World
- Vision of Urgency and Partnership in Building the New World
- Vision of Stewardship in Building the New World

May you live in the vision of God.

Grace and peace be with you.

Shalom.