

THE PARABLES OF JESUS

By Ashby L. Camp

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INTRODUCTION

I. General comments on the parables

The English word "parable" was taken from the Greek word *parabolē*, but *parabolē*, like its Hebrew/Aramaic counterpart (*mashal/mathla*), has a much broader meaning in the Gospels than our word "parable." In addition to what we would call parables, *parabolē* covers sayings we would classify as proverbs, maxims, riddles, and even comparisons and contrasts.

The teachings of Jesus that we will be focusing on can perhaps best be defined as a word picture of a familiar but fictional or imaginary circumstance that is given to communicate indirectly by analogy truth about the hearer's circumstance so as to motivate the hearer to act on his or her new insight. That is more detailed, and I think more adequate, than the popular definition "earthly stories with heavenly meanings."

Inherent in this definition is the notion that the purpose of parables is to communicate effectively. That Jesus intended to communicate by his parables is obvious from the fact he told them rather than remaining silent, and this intention is confirmed by his urging people to hear what he was saying through the parable (e.g., Mat. 13:9, 21:33). His questions to the disciples in Mk. 4:13 make clear his intention that they understand the parables, and Mat. 13:34-35 indicates that his speaking in parables had a revelatory function.

The question arises as to how that communicative purpose squares with Mk. 4:10-12 and the parallels in Mat. 13:10-15 and Lk. 8:9-10. These texts, especially Mk. 4:10-12, could be read to teach that Jesus told parables to obscure the truth so as to prevent some people from coming to understanding and salvation, but I think that is a misinterpretation.

What they teach is that Jesus speaks the truth about the kingdom in the disarming and defense-piercing form of parables so that the Isaianic hardness of the outsiders in failing to perceive and understand the truth, without which hardness they could turn and be forgiven, will be manifested clearly. By giving the unbelievers the maximum opportunity to engage, and thus ultimately to receive, the truth by presenting it indirectly in pictorial language, he put their hardness in the boldest relief possible. So he speaks to them in parables *because* they are hard hearted (Mat. 13:13) and *so that* they will manifest that hardness (Mk. 4:12; Lk. 8:10) as a testimony against themselves. The report of this stated purpose functions in the Gospels as encouragement for the readers to receive the message; to reject it is to show oneself to be among the hard hearted.

That parables are intended to communicate effectively does not mean that all parables are immediately or easily comprehended; they are not. The disciples found some of Jesus' parables puzzling and had to ask for an explanation (e.g., Mat. 13:36; Mk. 7:17; Lk. 8:9). The effectiveness of a parable sometimes depends on its meaning *not* being apparent on the surface. That is part of how it draws one in and gets past one's defenses. Parables communicate *effectively* in their ability to bring a message home, not in their ability to convey information directly or patently.

As Klyne Snodgrass puts it in *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 163: "Parables are not always obvious and self-explanatory, but even when enigmatic, their purpose is to enlighten. The very uncertainty of their reference is part of their appeal and often the means of their effectiveness, but they are not meant to obfuscate." He sees (p. 171) Mk. 4:22 as an apt summary of the purpose of parables: nothing is hidden in parables except that it should be brought into the open.

Robert Stein states in "The Genre of Parables" in Richard N. Longenecker, ed., *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 38:

Through a parable Nathan was able to discuss the issue of David's murder of Uriah and his adultery with Uriah's wife, for the reality part of the parable was only recognized after the parable had been told and explained. How far would Nathan have gotten if he had said to David: "O King, I would like to talk to you about your adultery with Bathsheba and your murder of Uriah?" The nature of a parable, however, enabled the prophet to speak to David about both his adultery and his murder. For disarmed by the innocuous nature of the parable, David was open to judge honestly the issue at hand.

Teaching through parables was not unique to Jesus. Klyne Snodgrass states in "Parable" in Joel B. Green and others, eds., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 594: "Jesus was not the first person to teach by parables and stories. There are both Greek and Semitic antecedents, but there is no evidence of anyone prior to Jesus using parables as consistently, creatively and effectively as he did."

The vagueness of the term parable has led naturally to disagreements over the number of parables in the Gospels. According to Snodgrass (2008, 22), estimates of the number range from thirty-seven to sixty-five. I do not plan to discuss all that could be classified as a parable, but I will cover enough of them that I suspect you will be glad to have me stop. Like David Wenham in *The Parables of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 19, "I have included some sayings of Jesus that others would not regard as parables and have excluded others which could qualify."

There also are a number of different ways of classifying parables. Snodgrass (2008, 11), for example, employs seven designations for Jesus' parables: aphoristic sayings, similitudes (double indirect), interrogative parables (double indirect), double indirect narrative parables, juridical parables, single indirect narrative parables, and "how much more" parables. Arland Hultgren, on the other hand, classifies the parables into two types in *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 3: narrative parables and similitudes. I will not venture into that discussion.

As for the arrangement of the presentation, I sympathize with Wenham who writes (p. 26), "It is hard to know where to begin or how to arrange a study of Jesus' parables: almost any arrangement has its advantages and disadvantages!" My scheme is inspired by the schemes of Wenham and Snodgrass (2008), modified as I saw fit. Some parables could fit under more than one of my headings, and I may not always have chosen the best one.

The task of interpreting Jesus' parables is made more difficult by our distance from the culture, language, and historical context in which they were spoken. We have to dig our way back to first-century Palestine to have any hope of hearing them correctly. In addition, we must develop an "educated feel" for what aspects of the parable are significant to the point or points being made and what aspects merely are part of the story structure. To quote Snodgrass (2008, 28), "*The key is knowing when to stop interpreting.* As with metaphor, parable interpretation is about understanding the limits – and the significance – of the analogy." He says elsewhere (2008, 187):

Parables do not give complete pictures, and certainly not complete pictures of theology. We should know by now that parables do not all work the same way and that each parable must be dealt with individually. Some have multiple correspondences, and some do not. Some use stock metaphors, but metaphors are always capable of being used in novel ways. Determining where an image has a direct correlation . . . and where images do not . . . is key to correct interpretation.

II. Background on the kingdom of God

The kingdom of God was central to Christ's ministry and message. Mat. 4:23 states (NIV) that Jesus "went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, *preaching*

the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people." Jesus says in Lk. 4:43 (NIV), "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent." See also, e.g., Mat. 9:35, Lk. 8:1, 9:2, 9:60.

George Ladd states in *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 54: "Modern scholarship is quite unanimous in the opinion that the Kingdom of God was the central message of Jesus." G. R. Beasley-Murray states in *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), x: "[The kingdom of God] pervades the entire proclamation of Jesus recorded in the gospels and appears largely to have determined the course of his ministry." Everett Ferguson states in *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 22, "All three Synoptic Gospels characterize the central theme of Jesus' preaching as 'the kingdom of God.'" And Arland Hultgren (p. 384) states: "The kingdom was certainly a main theme, even *the* main theme, of Jesus' message. Virtually all scholars would agree on that point."

Jesus' parables focus on various aspects of the kingdom of God. Snodgrass writes (1992, 599): "The primary focus of the parables is the coming of the kingdom of God and the resulting discipleship that is required." Steven Sheeley states in "Kingdom of God, Kingdom of Heaven" in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 768: "Even the parables of Jesus which do not seem to have a surface connection to the kingdom address the need for proper behavior and relationships in the light of the coming of God's kingdom." David Wenham puts it a bit more forcefully (p. 20):

What are Jesus' parables all about? The simple answer to that question is that they are all describing some aspect of the 'kingdom of God'. The 'kingdom of God' was the central theme of Jesus' preaching and indeed of his whole ministry, and the parables should all be seen and understood in that context.

So it is helpful, indeed necessary, to have some understanding of the kingdom of God as a background for studying the parables. That is the task for the remainder of this introduction. I know that I taught this at the beginning of the class on the Sermon on the Mount, but some were not here for that class. In addition, the information is necessary for those who may view this class online. If you were here for the Sermon on the Mount, bear with me. Perhaps the repetition will help solidify the point and reinforce the significance of this topic.

God in the beginning miraculously created all things, including human beings (Adam and Eve), during the six days of creation. The creation was at first an ideal place in which all things were acting in the way God desired. But soon Adam and Eve, who were to be God's representatives on earth, rejected his rule by disobeying him. By bringing sin into the human world, they spoiled God's very good creation. As a result, creation is not now the way it is supposed to be. It is no longer a paradise where all things

work together in peace and harmony under God's rule. Instead our world now includes things like anger, division, hatred, violence, destruction, death, decay, lying, stealing, suffering, sorrow, and pain. In that sense, it is a creation that is sick as a result of sin. It has fallen from its original state of glory, which is why Adam's sinning is known as "the Fall."

The story of the Bible is the story of God's work through the people of Israel to rescue his creation, which includes mankind, from its fallen state. People are the high point of God's creation, but his rescue effort includes all of creation because all of creation was harmed as a result of sin. That is why Paul in Rom. 8:19-22 says that creation itself looks forward to the day it will be freed from the consequences of human sin.

The scope and breadth of Christ's healing work is also seen in Col. 1:19-20 where Paul speaks of Jesus as the one through whom God the Father reconciled *all things* to himself, making peace by the blood of his cross. And it is seen in Eph. 1:9-10 where Paul says the mystery of God's will for the administration of the fullness of the times is to bring *all things* together in Christ, the things in the heavens and the things on the earth. "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him" (2 Cor. 1:20, ESV).

The Old Testament ends on a note of unfulfilled hope. It was clear that in one sense God always had ruled the world from the time of creation. He was on his heavenly throne (e.g., Ps. 11:4; Isa. 6:1) and reigned over all (e.g., 1 Chron. 16:31; Ps. 93:1, 96:10). But there was some sense in which his kingly rule was not being fully expressed. He was allowing creation to go on out of step with his ultimate intention for it, to continue in a state of sin and suffering that was contrary to his ultimate purpose and vision.

But the prophets saw that a day was coming in which God would express his rulership of creation in such a way that all things would be brought into harmony and conformity with his ultimate will and purpose. His creation would be redeemed from the dreadful consequences of sin that had invaded it. This world of rebellion, sin, hostility, and fragmentation would be rescued by God, transformed by him into a true utopia, a perfect reality of love, joy, and fellowship with God and one another.

Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen write in *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 122:

The people of Israel thought of history being comprised of two very distinct periods: *the present age* and *the age to come*. In *the present age*, which had begun with Adam's rebellion against God's rule, the whole of creation had been stained by sin. Inevitably, therefore, evil would continue to flourish in the world throughout the present age, even among God's own people of Israel, who had been called out to provide the solution to that evil. But in *the age to come*, God would intervene to cleanse and renew his creation.

N. T. Wright states in *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 299:

One of the central ways of expressing [the Jewish] hope was the division of time into two eras: the present age and the age to come. The present age was a time when the creator god seemed to be hiding his face; the age to come would see the renewal of the created world. The present age was the time of Israel's misery; in the age to come she would be restored. In the present age wicked men seemed to be flourishing; in the age to come they would receive their just reward.

On that day God would express his authority over creation in a way he was not doing at present; he would in his sovereign power bring his creation to its ultimate fulfillment. At that time, he *will be* king over all the earth (Zech. 14:9) in a manner unlike the present. Robert Saucy states in "The Eschatology of the Bible" in Frank E. Gaebelien, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 1:105:

According to the Scriptures, there is a sense in which God has always ruled and is even now the King over all creation (1 Chron 29:11, 12; Ps 103:19; 145:13). But there is another thread of truth that views the kingdom as yet to come (Zech. 14:9; Mat. 6:10). It is this last theme that dominates the eschatological hope of Scripture. God is king over all his creative works, but his kingdom is not established on the earth in human history. While he rules over the affairs of the earth with nothing occurring apart from his permissive will, he has allowed sin and rebellion to enter history and Satan to have a certain dominance as the "god of this age" (2 Cor 4:4). God's rule might be said therefore to be *over* the earth, but not directly *on* the earth. It is the coming of God to establish this latter condition, to bring his kingdom to earth in the vindication of his sovereign holiness, that has constituted the hope of God's people throughout all time.

As I. Howard Marshall expresses it in *Jesus the Savior* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 218, "[T]he [kingdom of God] is the full and powerful manifestation of the sovereignty that God already exercises over the world." N. T. Wright states (1992, 301): "And, in a phrase pregnant with meaning for both Jews and Christians, [the age to come] would above all be the 'kingdom of god'. Israel's god would become in reality what he was already believed to be. He would be king of the whole world."

Craig S. Keener states in *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 197: "Like the Old Testament, Jewish teachers could speak of God's present rule (especially among the people who obeyed his law). But Jewish people also looked for the kingdom as God's future rule, when he would reign unchallenged, as attested in regular Jewish prayers." Darrell Bock states in James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy, eds., *The Historical Jesus: Five Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 257:

Although [the kingdom of God is] not a common phrase in Hebrew Scripture, the idea that God rules is a frequent concept within it and Second Temple Judaism. However, this concept, as Jesus used it, is not about the inherent sovereignty God has as Creator. Rather it treats the idea of his promised redeeming rule expressed afresh in the world in the arrival of a newly dawning age of shalom. The kingdom vindicates the righteous and brings ultimate justice.

The O. T. uses different imagery to refer to this blessed state that God is going to create. The imagery varies in how sharply it distinguishes the blessed state from this present existence, but all of it says, in forms relevant to ancient Jews, that a time of divine blessing is coming. It says that the failures and sufferings of the present age would be put to rights by the coming of the new age.

Sometimes the Old Testament speaks of the restoration of Israel to greatness and of the coming of a new king like the great king David; God's healing the world's sicknesses and hatreds; God's people being freed from oppression; renewed prosperity and justice for the poor; war and weapons of war being abolished; death being swallowed up and tears being wiped away; alienation between God and man being removed; God's Spirit being poured out in a new way; and a new heaven and a new earth. See, e.g., Isaiah 2, 11, 25, 51:6, 61, 65:17-25; Jeremiah 31; Daniel 7, 12; Amos. 9:13-15; Micah 4; Joel 2.

In the first century, Israel was weak, poor, and under the rule of pagans (the Romans). Graeme Goldsworthy writes in *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 196, "The return from exile results in only a pale shadow of the predicted glorious kingdom for the people of God." Thomas Schreiner states in *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 44-45:

The prophets promised a new creation, a new temple, a new covenant, and a new king. The exile would be over, and the wilderness would bloom.

The great promises in the prophets, however, were not fulfilled when the exile ended in 536 B.C. Israel did return from Babylon and a temple was built, yet the temple was insignificant in comparison to the Solomonic temple. Nor was the nation enjoying glorious prosperity, the kind of glory envisioned in Isa. 40-66. Israel was small, struggling, and under the oppression of former powers. Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi document the low spiritual state of the nation. Nor did matters improve in the four hundred years before the coming of Jesus of Nazareth. Israel was a pawn in the struggle between the Ptolemies and the Seleucids. A brief period of freedom dawned with the Hasmoneans in the second and first centuries BC, but the interlude was brief, and soon the Romans swept in and subjugated Israel, appointing the Herodians and procurators to rule the land.

The people longed and prayed for the coming of God, for his final intervention when he would set all things right and rule in the fullest sense to the blessing of his people. In Mk. 15:43 Joseph of Arimathea is described as one who was "waiting for the kingdom of God" (TNIV).

It was into that religious, social, and political environment that Jesus came saying, "The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mk. 1:15) and "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Mat. 12:28) and "for behold, the kingdom of God is among you [in your midst]" (Lk. 17:21b).¹ Darrell Bock states in *Jesus According to Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 567:

When Israel was overrun by the nations, a longing existed that one day God would reestablish his rule on behalf of his people and show his comprehensive sovereignty to all humanity. After all, God had committed himself to David concerning a dynasty of duration (2 Sam. 7:13). It is here that the hope of a future kingdom of God, made not with hands, came to be contrasted with human kingdoms in Dan. 2 and 7. It is in the context of such expectation that Jesus used the expression "kingdom of God." What was hoped for was something that had existed in the past, but only as a mere glimpse of what had been promised: a rule to come involving total peace for God's people. In sum, as a result of the Babylonian captivity, kingdom hope is driven forward by the vision of the fullness of God's rule appearing some day. It was to this hope that Jesus preached.

Jesus was announcing the arrival of God's final intervention in history, the ultimate expression of his kingly rule on the world. Mat. 4:23 states (NIV) that Jesus "went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, *preaching the good news of the kingdom*, and healing every disease and sickness among the people." Mat. 9:35 states, "And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and *proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom* and healing every disease and every affliction." Jesus says in Lk. 4:43 (NIV), "I must preach the *good news of the kingdom of God* to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent." Luke 8:1 says that Jesus went through cities and villages "proclaiming and bringing the *good news of the kingdom of God*." In Lk. 9:2 Jesus sent the twelve out "to *proclaim the kingdom of God* and to heal." In Lk. 9:60 he told a man he had called to follow him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and *proclaim the kingdom of God*."

¹ Note that the "kingdom of heaven" is just another way of referring to the kingdom of God. Wenham writes (p. 23):

[T]he phrase 'kingdom of heaven' is just an alternate way of saying 'kingdom of God' . . . Matthew, writing his distinctively Jewish gospel, uses the alternative expression because it refers to God indirectly (as Jews often did) rather than directly, and perhaps because it makes it clear that the kingdom in question is not a purely this-worldly kingdom. And yet the kingdom which Jesus proclaimed was not just up in heaven; it was more like an invasion of earth by heaven!

his lifetime, but its entire consummation awaits his return." Thomas Schreiner states (p. 54), "The kingdom of God in Jesus' teaching is both present and future. In other words, the kingdom is already inaugurated but not yet consummated."

Preben Vang and Terry Carter state in *Telling God's Story: The Biblical Narrative from Beginning to End* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 199:

According to Jesus, the kingdom of God is already here. Jesus inaugurated it! The "age to come" has broken into the "present age." God is making his presence felt already now. Yet the kingdom of God is not here in full. Evil still exists. God does not yet fill "all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28). This will only happen at the time of consummation when Christ comes back. We now live between the times. The promised "age to come" has already begun but is not here in full. The "old age" is still here as well.

David Turner states in *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 43:

Ladd (1974) puts to rest any notion that the kingdom is only present or only future. He demonstrates that a comprehensive treatment of the kingdom can only conclude that it is both present and future, and nearly all contemporary NT scholars agree. . . .

. . . Perhaps the best way to describe the dynamic nature of God's reign is to say that it has been inaugurated at Jesus's first coming and will be consummated when he returns.

Michael Bird puts it this way in *Introducing Paul* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 114, 116:

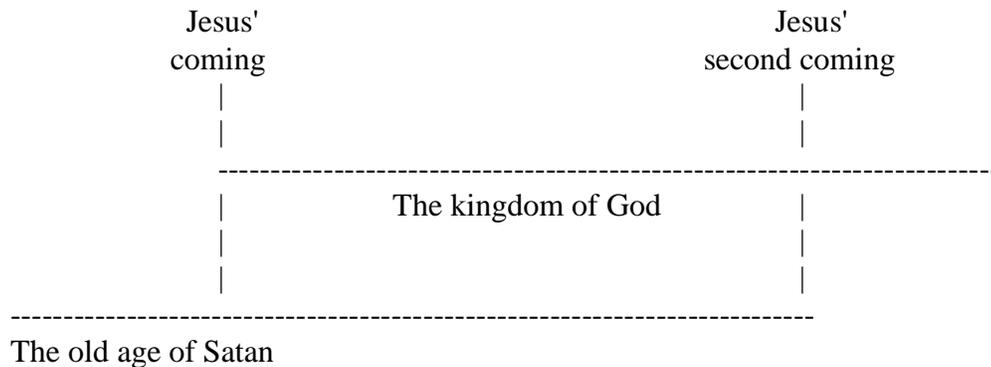
Fundamental to Paul's theology is that the future age (the eschaton) has already broken in and has been *inaugurated* through the life, death and resurrection of the Son of God. . . .

The coming of Jesus has inaugurated a new era of redemptive history and God's new age has been launched upon the world, something like a covert operation seizing key nodes along the rear echelons of an opposing force. Those people who confess faith in the Messiah and experience the transforming power of the Spirit of God are living billboards in our global metropolis advertising God's activity in the world and pointing to things soon to come. At the same time, the old age continues, death and evil are realities that need to be confronted and endured, but their power has been broken in principle and even in practice. What is more, the day is coming when God will finally do away with them and the old age will be no more. On that day God will be 'all in all' (1 Cor. 15:28).

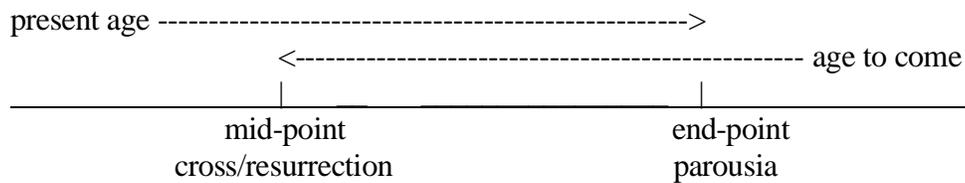
Darrell Bock states (2009, 257, fn. 13), "At its core [the kingdom of God] looks to the vindication of God's people in a rule of God that brings ultimate peace. Its coming is both present and now in inauguration and yet to come in consummation." D. A. Carson states in *The God Who Is There* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 82:

[S]ometimes Jesus speaks of the kingdom as already having dawned. It is already here, operating secretly, as it were. It is like yeast that is put into dough; it is already quietly working and having its effect. Yet elsewhere Jesus speaks of the kingdom as what comes at the end when there is a final consummation and tremendous transformation. So the kingdom is already; seen another way, it has not yet come.

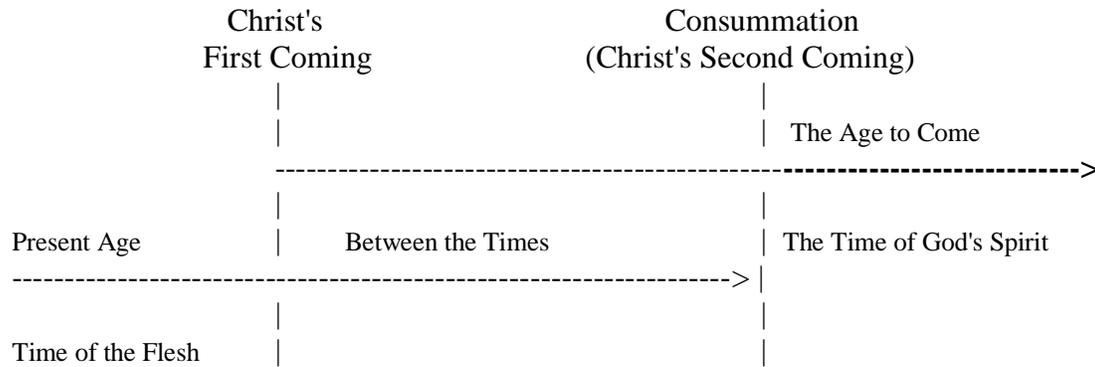
Wenham (p. 63) diagrams the concept like this:



Dunn diagrams it this way (p. 464):



Vang and Carter diagram it this way (p. 200):



Texts in addition to the parables that indicate the kingdom of God is a present reality between the first and second comings of Jesus Christ include Lk. 17:21b ("the kingdom of God is among you" or "in your midst"), Rom. 14:17 (Paul no doubt considered the named aspects of the kingdom as being present), 1 Cor. 4:20 ("kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power"), Col. 1:13 (God "has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son"), Heb. 12:28 ("let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken"), Rev. 1:9 ("your brother and partner in the . . . kingdom"), and Rev. 5:10 ("you have made them a kingdom").

Texts in addition to the parables that indicate the kingdom of God is a future hope include Mat. 7:21-23 (kingdom entered at the judgment), Mat. 25:34 (Jesus says at judgment, "inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world"), Mk. 14:25 and parallels ("I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God"), Gal. 5:21b (also 1 Cor. 6:9-10, 15:50, and Eph. 5:5 – kingdom is something to be inherited), 2 Tim. 4:1 (kingdom connected with Jesus' appearing in judgment), and 2 Pet. 1:11 (entrance into eternal kingdom is future).

This same "now and not yet" aspect characterizes other kingdom-related concepts:

- Eternal life – **now** (Jn. 5:24, 6:47; 1 Jn. 5:11, 5:13); **still to come** (Mat. 19:29, 25:46; Mk. 10:30, Lk. 18:30, Rom. 6:22; Gal. 6:8; Tit. 3:7; Jude 21)
- End of the ages – **now** (1 Cor. 10:11; Heb. 9:26); **still to come** (Mat. 13:39-40, 13:49-50, 28:20; Mk. 10:30; Lk. 18:30; 1 Cor. 2:6; Gal. 1:4; Eph. 1:21, 2:7, 5:16; Heb. 6:5)
- Redemption – **now** (Rom. 3:24; 1 Cor. 1:30; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14); **still to come** (Lk. 21:28; Rom. 8:23; Eph. 4:30)
- Salvation – **now** (Rom. 8:24; Eph. 2:5, 2:8; 2 Tim. 1:9; Tit. 3:4-5; 1 Pet. 3:21; Jude 3); **still to come** (Acts 15:11; Rom. 5:9-10, 13:11; 1 Cor. 3:15; 1 Thess. 5:9; Heb. 1:14, 9:28; 1 Pet. 1:5)
- Adoption – **now** (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 3:26, 4:6; Heb. 12:7-8); **still to come** (Lk. 20:36; Rom. 8:23)
- Death's defeat – **now** (2 Tim. 1:10); **still to come** (1 Cor. 15:26)

- New creation – **now** (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15); **still to come** (Rom. 8:19-23; Eph. 1:10; Rev. 21:1-4)

The inauguration of the kingdom involved a complex of events that are viewed as a single unit. The kingdom was ushered in through the life and ministry of Christ; his death, resurrection, and ascension; and the outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. That's why Jesus could say before the cross and before Pentecost that the kingdom "has come upon you" (Mat. 12:28) and "the kingdom of God is among you [in your midst]" (Lk. 17:21b). The process of inauguration was underway, a process that would run through the events of Pentecost.

It is at Christ's return that the redemption he began nearly 2,000 years ago will come to completion. That is the time when in Rev. 11:15 the heavenly voices say, "The kingdom of the world *has become* the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." And that is the time when in Rev. 11:17 the twenty-four elders say, "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power *and begun* to reign." At Christ's return, the kingdom he inaugurated with his first coming will be consummated or finalized.

Thus, Robert Stein writes in Walter A. Elwell, ed., *The Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 453:

The kingdom of God is both now and not yet. Thus the kingdom of God is "realized" and present in one sense, and yet . . . future in another sense. This is not a contradiction but simply the nature of the kingdom. The kingdom has come in fulfillment of the Old Testament promises. A new covenant has been established. But its final manifestation and consummation lie in the future. Until then, we are to be good and faithful servants (Luke 19:11-27).

This expectation is what is behind Peter's statement in Acts 3:20-21 that Christ must remain in heaven "until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets" (TNIV). And it is the coming of the kingdom in this consummated sense for which Jesus instructed the disciples to pray in Mat. 6:10: "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

It is at Christ's return that the children of God will receive glorious resurrection *bodies*. This is clear from Rom. 8:11, 23; Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Corinthians 15 (esp. 20-23, 42-44, 49). A bodily resurrection also is implicit in Jesus' talk of rising from the grave (Jn. 5:28-29) and in Paul's condemnation of Hymenaeus and Philetus for claiming that the resurrection had already occurred (2 Tim. 2:18).

Roger Olson writes in *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002) 311, 314:

The bodily resurrection of all people at some time after death has played a prominent role in Christian teaching throughout history. In spite of a pronounced tendency among untutored lay Christians to focus attention on immortality of souls and neglect bodily resurrection, the fathers of the church, medieval Christian thinkers, all the Protestant Reformers and faithful modern biblical scholars and theologians have emphasized the bodily resurrection as the blessed hope of believers in Christ. . . .

It would be impossible to discover any single point of greater agreement in the history of Christian thought than this one: *the future bodily resurrection of the dead is the blessed hope of all who are in Christ Jesus by faith*. Over two millennia the church's leaders and faithful theologians have unanimously taught this above the immortality of souls and as more important than some ethereal intermediate state between bodily death and bodily resurrection when Christ returns. And yet, as we lamented earlier, it seems that the vast majority of Christians do not know this and neglect belief in bodily resurrection in favor of belief in immediate post-mortem heavenly, spiritual existence as ghost-like beings (or even angels!) "forever with the Lord in heaven."

Not only will our bodies be transformed to be suitable for eternity with God, but all of creation will be transformed, as Paul indicates in Rom. 8:18-23. This is the new heavens and new earth referred to in Isa. 65:17, 66:22; 2 Pet. 3:13, and Rev. 21:1.

When Jesus said in Jn. 18:36 that his kingdom was not "of this world," he was not saying it had nothing to do with this physical world. He was saying that his kingdom does not originate or derive from this world. As Colin Kruse notes in *John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 359, he was saying that "[h]is kingdom is given by God, not established by human struggle. His kingdom is active in this world, and will one day come with power, but its power is not of this world, it is of God."

As Wayne Grudem states in *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 613:

We as resurrected men and women will live forever in "new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (2 Pet. 3:13). We will live in a renewed earth that "will be set free from its bondage to decay" (Rom. 8:21) and become like a new Garden of Eden. . . . In this very material, physical, renewed universe, it seems that we will need to live as human beings with physical bodies, suitable for life in God's renewed physical creation. Specifically, Jesus' physical resurrection body affirms the goodness of God's original creation of man not as a mere spirit like the angels, but as a creature with a physical body that was "very good." We must not fall into the error of thinking that nonmaterial existence is

somehow a better form of existence for creatures: when God made us as the pinnacle of his creation, he gave us physical bodies.

"Within the Protestant world, there has been disagreement as to whether the earth is to be destroyed completely and replaced, or just changed and renewed" (Grudem, 1160). I think Grudem has it right when he states (p. 1160-1161):

The [radical-transformation] position seems preferable here, for it is difficult to think that God would entirely annihilate his original creation, thereby seeming to give the devil the last word and scrapping the creation that was originally "very good" (Gen. 1:31). The passages above that speak of shaking and removing the earth and of the first earth passing away may simply refer to its existence in its present form, not its very existence itself, and even 2 Peter 3:10, which speaks of the elements dissolving and the earth and the work on it being burned up, may not be speaking of the earth as a planet but rather the surface things on the earth (that is, much of the ground and the things on the ground).

At his first coming, Jesus not only announced the kingdom's arrival but also demonstrated its character and gave us a foretaste of it. John Piper remarks in a sermon titled "Christ and Cancer":

The answer to why Jesus did not raise all the dead is that, contrary to the Jewish expectation, the first coming of the Messiah was *not* the consummation and full redemption of this fallen age. The first coming was rather to purchase that consummation, illustrate its character, and bring a *foretaste* of it to his people. Therefore, Jesus raised some of the dead to illustrate that he has that power and one day will come again and exercise it for all his people. And he healed the sick to illustrate that in his final kingdom this is how it will be. There will be no more crying or pain any more.

And just to round things out, let me say that I think we often have not been precise enough in speaking about the relationship between the church and the kingdom of God. The two are closely related, but we at times have conflated them. I think George Ladd captures the distinction well in *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 109:

The Kingdom is primarily the dynamic reign or kingly rule of God, and derivatively, the sphere in which the rule is experienced. In biblical idiom, the Kingdom is not identified with its subjects. They are the people of God's rule who enter it, live under it, and are governed by it. The church is the community of the Kingdom but never the Kingdom itself. Jesus' disciples belong to the Kingdom as the Kingdom belongs to them; but they are not the Kingdom. The Kingdom is the rule of God; the church is a society of women and men.

C. Marvin Pate writes in Walter A. Elwell, ed., *The Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 96:

As intimately related as the church and the kingdom of God are, the New Testament does not equate the two, as is evident in the fact the early Christians preached the kingdom, not the church (Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). The New Testament identifies the church as the people of the kingdom (Rev. 5:10; etc.), not the kingdom itself. Moreover, the church is the instrument of the kingdom. This is especially clear in Matthew 16:18-19, where the preaching of Peter and the church become the keys to opening up the kingdom of God to all who would enter.

Herman Ridderbos states in "Kingdom of God/Kingdom of Heaven" in I. Howard Marshall and others, eds., *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 649:

A connection exists between kingdom and church, but they are not identical, even in the present age. The kingdom is the whole of God's redeeming activity in Christ in this world; the church is the assembly of those who belong to Jesus Christ. . . . The church receives her whole constitution from the kingdom, on all sides she is beset and directed by the revelation, the progress, the future coming of the kingdom of God, without at any time being the kingdom herself or even being identified with it.

G. W. Bromiley states in "Church" in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 1:693:

[T]he kingdom is quite evidently not the Church, for we could hardly proclaim the Church as the first apostles proclaimed the kingdom (Acts 8:12). . . . To the extent that the Church is a fellowship of those who have accepted the kingdom, submitted to its rule, and become its heirs, we may rather believe that it is a creation and instrument and therefore a form and manifestation of the kingdom prior to its final establishment in glory.

And Thomas Schreiner states in *New Testament Theology* (p. 68): "[T]he kingdom works in and through the church but is not coequal with the church. The church per se cannot be identified with the ruling power of God, even though God's transforming power is manifested in the church."

THE PARABLES

I. Jesus Brings the Kingdom

A. The Bridegroom in their midst (Mat. 9:14-15; Mk. 2:18-20; Lk. 5:33-35)

As mentioned above, Jesus not only announced the kingdom's arrival, he gave powerful demonstrations of this heavenly invasion. Mark reports in just the first two chapters of his book: Jesus exorcises a demon (1:21-28); Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law and multitudes of people in Capernaum (1:29-35); Jesus cleanses a leper (1:40-45); Jesus pronounces forgiveness of a paralytic's sins and heals him physically (2:1-12); Jesus ministers to a tax collector, an irreligious outcast of society (2:13-17).

Jesus' ministry astounded people and created a major buzz. Mark 1:22 notes that the people were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. Mark 1:27-28 states (ESV): *And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, "What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him."* And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee. Peter tells Jesus in Mk. 1:37 that everyone is looking for him. Mark reports in 1:45 that Jesus had become such an attraction that he could no longer openly enter a town but was in desolate places; and even then people were coming to him from every quarter. In Mk. 2:2 so many people were gathered at the home in Capernaum in which Jesus was preaching that there was no room even at the door. Mark says in 2:12 that after Jesus healed the paralytic the people "were all amazed and glorified God, saying, 'We never saw anything like this!'"

Though Jesus' ministry excited many people, it disturbed others. Some were accusing him of blaspheming in claiming to forgive sins (Mk. 2:7), and others questioned why he ate with tax collectors and "sinners" (Mk. 2:16). This was new and contrary to tradition. Proper religious people just didn't say or do those kinds of things.

One of Jesus' departures from tradition that upset some people was his breaking of the tradition of regular fasting. The Old Testament prescribed a national fast on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29, 31; 23:27, 32; Num. 29:7; Acts 27:9), and it seems from 1 Sam. 14:24 and Jer. 36:6 that a fast could be called in special times of penance, such as times of crisis or emergency. Several fasts apparently had become customary after Judah's exile to Babylon, falling on days that were significant in terms of the siege of Jerusalem (see Zech. 7:1-5, 8:19). Robert Guelich says of fasting in *Mark 1-8:26*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989), 108-109:

Fasting was a common rite in Judaism with roots deep in the OT. At times it was an expression of mourning for the loss of someone or something (1 Sam 31:13; 2 Sam 1:12). More often it was an expression of contrition and penitence, a sign of repentance marked by the symbols of mourning (Matt 6:16). Combined with prayer, fasting was a statement of self-denial and self-humiliation depicting one as self-effacing and submissive to God's will.

In the intertestamental period, fasting in Judaism increased. Lk. 5:33 says the disciples of John fasted often, and Lk. 18:12 indicates that the Pharisees fasted twice a week. Note also Anna's fasting in Lk. 2:37. Fasting had become an expected mark of piety. But Jesus and his disciples did not engage in regular voluntary fasts. On the contrary, Jesus was more associated with feasting, so much so that he was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard (Mat. 11:19; Lk. 7:34).

This was such an obvious difference between Jesus and his disciples on the one hand and the Pharisees and John's disciples on the other that he was asked to justify it; he was asked in Mk. 2:18 (Mat. 9:14; Lk. 5:33) to explain why John's disciples and the Pharisees fast but his disciples do not. Jesus' answer is theologically loaded, but it requires some background understanding to grasp its import.

Mark 2:19-20 (ESV): *And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. . . ."*

According to Craig Keener in Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 685, "Jewish weddings normally lasted seven days," and "[m]any of the closest associates of the bride and groom remained the full seven days." He states (p. 686):

Jewish people emphasized joyous celebration at wedding feasts; texts often use weddings to symbolize the greatest joy, in contrast to the epitome of sorrow, grief at a funeral (1 Macc 9:39-41; Josephus *J.W.* 6.5.3 § 301). As one must mourn with the bereaved, one was also obligated to celebrate with the couple at a wedding (y. *Ketub.* 1:1 § 6).

Julius J. Scott Jr. writes in *Customs and Controversies: Intertestamental Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 250:

There were prescribed stages for the wedding celebration: "(1) preparation of the bride, (2) transfer of the bride from her father's home to that of the groom, (3) the bride's introduction into the home of the groom, and (4) blessings and festivities within the husband's home." [Quote from S. Safrai, "Home and Family" in S. Safrai, M. Stern, et al., eds., *The Jewish People in the First Century* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 757.] The celebration included many guests, both invited and otherwise. Witnesses were required for the reciting of blessings throughout the week of the wedding. There were feasting and a general atmosphere of merriment and rejoicing.

Wenham writes (p. 28):

The normal procedure seems to have been for the guests to gather at the bridegroom's house on the day appointed for the marriage. The bridegroom would go to the bride's home to claim her, and then he would bring her in joyful procession to his own home. The eating and drinking would then begin, and would often go on through the night. The coming of the bridegroom with his bride was thus the signal for the wedding feast to begin.

Jesus says that his disciples do not fast because the current period is like the celebration of a wedding feast when the groom is present. Wenham notes (p. 28), "The implication is that something joyful and significant, like a wedding, is taking place in Jesus' ministry and, furthermore, that Jesus is the bridegroom at the wedding, being the reason for the joy and celebration."

The joyful and significant thing that is taking place in Jesus' ministry is the ushering in of the long-awaited kingdom of God. As I have emphasized, the kingdom of God was central to Jesus' ministry and teaching. Mark begins his account of Jesus' ministry saying (1:14-15, ESV): *Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God,¹⁵ and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."* Mat. 4:23 states (NIV) that Jesus "went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, *preaching the good news of the kingdom*, and healing every disease and sickness among the people." Jesus says in Lk. 4:43 (NIV), "*I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.*" See also, e.g., Mat. 9:35, Lk. 8:1, 9:2, 9:60.

This is why Jesus says in Mat. 13:17 (ESV), "*For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.*" France comments in *Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 515:

The prophets looked forward to the day of eschatological restoration, to the coming of what Jesus now calls 'the kingdom of heaven,' but saw it only in prefiguration and promise, not in existential reality. . . . Like Abraham, who 'rejoiced to see my day' (John 8:56), the prophets spoke of 'the grace given to *you*,' aware that their service was not for their own benefit but for '*yours*,' things which even angels are agog to get a glimpse of (1 Pet 1:10-12)! There is an incredulous wonder running through these NT reflections on the privilege of those who live at the time when God's saving purpose comes to fruition.

David Turner says (p. 340) regarding Mat. 13:17: "[T]he disciples are graciously blessed with seeing eyes and hearing ears. This blessedness exceeds that of many prophets and righteous people, who longed to hear and see what the disciples have heard and seen. Jesus's disciples are privileged to experience the eschatological words and deeds of Jesus that inaugurate the kingdom."

Linking the kingdom to a feast is not surprising in light of a text like Isa. 25:6-8, which employs that imagery. Isaiah 25:6-8 states (ESV): *On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.* ⁷ *And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations.* ⁸ *He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.*

Indeed, Jesus makes explicit the connection between the kingdom and a wedding feast in Mat. 22:2, where he says (ESV) *"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son . . ."* He does it again in Mat. 25:1-13. In speaking of himself as the bridegroom, Jesus appropriates for himself imagery that in the Old Testament is used of God. See, e.g., Isa. 5:1, 54:5-6, 62:4-5; Jer. 2:2, 2:32; Ezek. 16:6-8; Hos. 2:19. This is a somewhat veiled identification of himself with God.

Jesus prophesies in v. 20 that the joy and celebration (and thus lack of fasting) his disciples properly exhibit in his presence will turn to fasting when he is taken from them. This seems to be a reference to the temporary mourning they will experience after his arrest and execution and prior to his resurrection (see Jn. 16:16-22). He is revealing that his coming violent death is something he knows and embraces.

So Jesus indicates that fasting is not appropriate when he is physically present with the disciples and is appropriate when he is arrested and executed, but he does not address the propriety of fasting in the period between his ascension and his return, the time when he is physically in heaven but present on earth in and through the Spirit. There is a sense in which Jesus is with us always (Mat. 28:20), but also a sense in which he is away from us, as reflected in the prayer "Come Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20) and "Our Lord come!" (1 Cor. 16:22) and in Paul's statement in 2 Cor. 5:6 that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord.

We know Jesus told the disciples in Jn. 16:20-22 that their sorrow at his death will at his resurrection turn into a joy that will not be taken from them, and we also know that the church fasted on occasion after Christ's ascension (Acts 13:2-3, 14:23). So it seems that fasting is acceptable, perhaps even expected (Mat. 6:16-18),³ as we long for the consummation and all that it will entail, including the Lord's "full presence," but that this fasting is to take place in the overarching realization of the kingdom's inauguration. Just as we still grieve in this overlap of ages but not as others who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13), so we still fast in this overlap but with a different perspective. See Kent D.

³ I say *perhaps* even expected because, as I. Howard Marshall notes regarding Mat. 6:16-18 in Richard N. Longenecker, ed., *Into God's Presence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 125:

The saying is directed to those who hear the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:1 – 8:1) and is cast in terms of their current religious practices – that is, the giving of alms, the saying of prayers, and fasting.

Elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount the practice of offering sacrifices at the temple is taken for granted. It follows, therefore, that not all of the practices assumed by Jesus in order to communicate with his audience on its own terms necessarily carry forward as things that his followers will do.

Berghuis, *Christian Fasting: A Theological Approach* (N.p.: Biblical Studies Press, 2007), 47-52 (though he believes that Mk. 2:20 and parallels speak directly of fasting during the overlap of ages).

B. The children playing (Mat. 11:16-19; Lk. 7:31-35)

The marketplaces of towns and villages of the ancient world were a natural place for children to congregate and play together. Parents would go there with their children, and the children would entertain themselves by playing together, much as they do today on school playgrounds. In Mat. 11:16-19 and Lk. 7:31-35, Jesus compares the generation of his day to children in the marketplaces who complain when their playmates do not go along with the game they were trying to play. He says (Mat. 11:16b-17, ESV) that generation was "like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates,

"We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn."

They are like children who complain when others do not go along with their expectations in that they criticized both John the Baptist and Jesus for not conforming to their expectations. John deprived himself of food and drink, and they said he had a demon (he wasn't "dancing" as they expected). Jesus did not so deprive himself, and they said he was a glutton and a drunkard (he wasn't "mourning" as they expected). Despite their rejection, Jesus says in Mat. 11:19 that wisdom is justified by her deeds (by all her children – Lk. 7:35). He is saying that "for those willing to see it there was perfectly good evidence of God's wisdom at work in Jesus' own ministry. The signs of God's revolution were there" (Wenham, 31).

C. The unshrunk cloth & new wine (Mat. 9:16-17; Mk. 2:21-22; Lk. 5:36-39)

After Jesus explained in Mk. 2:19-20 and parallels why his disciples do not fast, he said in Mk. 2:21-22 (ESV): *No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made.*²² *And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins-- and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins.*

Jesus is saying that the kingdom he is ushering in is such a radical new reality that it cannot be confined to the old patterns of Jewish piety. It is not a mere tweaking of the status quo; it is the kingdom of God invading the present age. Of course, Jesus did not see himself as starting something completely new, something with no connection to the past. Rather, he "saw himself as building on and bringing to fulfillment God's plan and purpose revealed in the Old Testament and in the history of the people of Israel" (Wenham, 33).

That is why he says in Mat. 5:17 that he has not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them. This link with the past is indicated in Mat. 13:52: *And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."* Wenham comments (p. 33):

Jesus implies that Christian teachers are similar to the Jewish theological experts in some ways, and yet, whereas the Jewish teachers looked back to the past, to the great figure of Moses above all, Jesus' disciples had not only the old but also great new treasures as well – in Jesus and his message of the kingdom, being the fulfillment of Moses and the prophets.

Wenham's conclusion about the unshrunk cloth and the new wine (p. 33-34) is worth quoting at length:

Jesus was not an iconoclastic revolutionary, smashing everything that had gone before, but he did see his coming as bringing a decisively new stage in God's purpose. Once the space rocket's motors have fired and the rocket lifts off the launch-pad, the space mission moves into a quite new and most exciting stage for which everything else has been preparation. So Jesus' ministry represented the 'lift-off' of God's revolution, and things could never be the same again. As with Jesus' parable of the bridegroom and the feast, so with the parables of the patch and the wine Jesus makes a remarkable claim for himself: he has brought God's promised revolution into the world. God has worked in the history of his people in wonderful ways, but now something of a decisively new order was taking place.

Luke's account includes (5:39) Jesus' statement (ESV), *"And no one after drinking old wine desires the new, for he says, 'The old is good.'"* I think Wenham is correct in seeing this as an ironical comment on people's resistance to Jesus' ministry. As he sums up the meaning (p. 32-33), "The conservative 'old-guard' who are unwilling to receive the revolution of God are like people extolling the virtues of old wine; but this time it is the new 'wine' which is far superior!"

D. The binding of the strong man (Mat. 12:24-29; Mk. 3:22-27; Lk. 11:15-22)

Jesus' remarkable ministry drew the ire of some religious leaders. They could not deny his mighty works, but given that he did not fit with their traditional notions of piety (hobnobbing with sinners, not fasting, and not observing the Sabbath in the way they thought he should), they concluded in Mk. 3:22 (and parallels) that a demon was empowering him. Indeed, his power was so extraordinary that they said he was possessed by Beelzebul, the chief of demons, and claimed that that was the secret of his remarkable exorcisms.

Jesus showed the implausibility of that accusation by pointing out that such serious infighting within Satan's household would spell its doom. In Mat. 12:27 and Lk. 11:19 he made an additional point by exposing their double standard. He asks, "And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out?"

In saying that his exorcisms were demonic they were saying implicitly that the exorcisms done by their religious friends, which they fully embraced, also were demonic, which is why Jesus says, "Therefore they will be your judges." As Wenham notes (p. 37), "Jesus is not suggesting that his exorcisms are no different from those of other exorcists: his exorcisms seem to have been of a different order from those of others (e.g. Mk. 1:27), and even his opponents recognized them as such (hence their ascription of them to the chief of demons)."

In Mk. 3:27 (and parallels) Jesus gives the correct explanation of his exorcisms. He says, "But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. Then indeed he may plunder his house." Jesus' exorcisms are the opposite of working for Satan. They are an unprecedented expression of power over him. Satan is the strong man Jesus has tied up so as to be able to take away his goods, that is, to free those he had taken over.

In Mat. 12:28 and Lk. 11:20, Jesus expressly ties his extraordinary exercise of power over Satan to his ushering in of the kingdom of God. He says, "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." As with his healings and raisings of the dead, his exorcisms were an illustration of the kingdom's character, a foretaste of the final and complete expulsion of all demons at the consummation. As Wenham remarks (p. 38):

Jesus' ministry did not of course mean the complete overthrow of Satan immediately. We shall see . . . that Jesus' ministry represented the start of the revolution, not its completion: there were crucial battles ahead, not least at Jesus' crucifixion (see Jn. 12:31). Nevertheless, the revolution had really begun, and there were unmistakable signs of Satan's downfall.

Matthew, fourteen verses later, and Luke, two verses later, include Jesus' saying about the expelled demon who returns to the house from which he was expelled with seven worse demons (Mat. 12:43-45; Lk. 11:24-26). Wenham comments (p. 38):

The saying is a warning of the dangers of getting rid of evil without filling the vacuum with good. Jesus may be contrasting other people's exorcisms with his own, but he may be speaking more generally of his opponents' ministry. They, like Jesus, are in favor of 'exorcising Satan', but in rejecting God's revolution in Jesus they are leaving themselves exposed to increased Satanic attack. Jesus, on the other hand, brings the revolution of God's Spirit, expelling evil and filling 'the house' with good, so that it can be kept 'clean' and 'in order'. The revolution of God is the defeat of Satan and the coming of God's cleansing and renewing presence.

II. The Kingdom En Route to the Consummation

A. The growing seed (Mk. 4:26-29)

Jesus' teaching about the arrival of the kingdom of God raised questions. People saw in Jesus and his ministry something new, exciting, and powerful, but there was a disconnect between what they saw, as great as it was, and the glorious state for which they longed. Given their understanding that the arrival of the kingdom would mean the end of the old, sin-marred age, they questioned how Jesus could speak of the kingdom's presence when they were surrounded by hallmarks of the old age: sin, fragmentation, suffering, sorrow, and death.

One of the parables in which Jesus addresses this problem is the parable of the growing seed, which occurs only in Mk. 4:26-29. He says (ESV): "*The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. ²⁷ He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. ²⁸ The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. ²⁹ But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.*"

The kingdom of God is analogous to the entire scene narrated by the parable. In the parable, there is an initial sowing of seed that without any visible cause (i.e., by the hand of God) ultimately culminates in the blessing of a crop of grain ripe for harvest; it culminates in an expression of the seed that looks quite different from its initial state, the newly-sown field. The kingdom of God is like that in that the kingdom that is inaugurated through the complex of Christ's ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension, will without any visible cause ultimately culminate in the blessing of the consummated kingdom, an expression of the inaugurated kingdom that looks quite different from its initial state.

C. E. B. Cranfield summarizes the point of the parable this way in *The Gospel According to Saint Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 168, "As seedtime is followed in due time by harvest, so will the present hiddenness and ambiguousness of the kingdom of God be succeeded by its glorious manifestation." In Snodgrass's words (2008, 189):

Jesus ministry has inaugurated a sequence of action leading to the fullness of God's kingdom just as surely as sowing sets in play a spontaneous process leading to harvest. Even if hidden (cf. 4:22) and unrecognized, the kingdom is present and will be fully revealed in God's time. The point is not merely that the kingdom is coming, for most Jews would assume that. The parable asserts that the kingdom process is already under way with Jesus' teaching and activity and that the glorious revelation of the kingdom has its beginning in, and is directly tied to, what he is doing.

You see, the kingdom's coming is more complex than the expectation that political subjugation, evil, and want would disappear as soon as it arrived. Snodgrass comments (2008, 188), "From the parable people would have to expand their understanding of the kingdom to allow for its not being so obvious and for some passing of time before it was fully in effect." He adds (p. 188-189):

Often overlooked is the importance of this parable for understanding Jesus' eschatological teaching. . . . [T]his parable . . . anticipates some length of time between Jesus' present and the end-time appearing of the kingdom. The kingdom involves the passing of time. No hint is given as to how long that time might be, but this parable should at least slow down any overemphasis on a soon appearing kingdom. This and other parables assume at least two stages of the kingdom, a time of sowing and growth and the time of harvest.

As it is God who in ways unknown to man produces the precious harvest from something as subtle and unobtrusive as a seeded field, so it is God who will in ways unknown to man produce the new heaven and new earth from something as seemingly insignificant as the ministry of a Jewish carpenter in a backwater of the Roman Empire. Because this is God's work and not man's, we can be confident in its accomplishment. Snodgrass states (2008, 189), "The parable then is optimistic; in spite of appearances people may be confident that what has begun with Jesus will lead to the full realization of the kingdom. Although they are not mentioned in the text, patience and encouragement are results flowing from this parable."

With many commentators, I do not believe the reference to growth in the parable is intended to teach that the inaugurated kingdom gradually transforms over time into the consummated kingdom, as if this world gradually morphs into the perfect existence where there is ultimate fellowship with God and man and no death, mourning, crying, or pain (Rev. 21:1-4). It is clear from Jesus' teaching (including some discussed below) and other teaching in the New Testament that the final judgment, the expulsion of evil, the resurrection, and the transformation of creation will occur in conjunction with Jesus' second coming. His return will effect the consummation, which will be a radical change, the "heavenization" of creation, brought about miraculously by the power of God. Snodgrass remarks (2008, 226), "The point is frequently made that the kingdom does not grow, and in one sense this claim is justified. If the kingdom is defined as God coming to be king in fulfillment of the OT promises, growth is obviously not pertinent. The kingdom – God's coming – needs no growth."

I think the parable (and others) uses growth, which is a *gradual*, drastic transformation *over* a period of time, because there was nothing in their common experience, which is the currency of parables, exhibiting a *sudden* (miraculous), drastic transformation *after* a period of time. The point is the God-created contrast between the beginning and the end, not the process by which God brought about the contrast. As Beasley-Murray states (p. 123) regarding the similar parables of the mustard seed and the leaven (see below), "Most scholars agree that the stress in the parables falls on the

beginning and the end of the operation of the kingdom and that the *process* that lies in between is ignored." Charles H. H. Scobie likewise comments in *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 140:

The parables of the mustard seed and the leaven . . . do *not* speak of the gradual growth of the kingdom, and still less of the triumphant progress of the church in history. They are parables not of growth, but of *contrast*, for they contrast the seeming insignificance of the kingdom at work in Jesus' ministry with its *future* coming in power and glory (cf. Jeremias 1963: 146-149). Similarly, in the parable of the seed growing secretly (Mark 4:26-29), the emphasis is not on growth but on the fact that "with the same certainty as the harvest comes for the husbandman after his long waiting," so God will "bring in the Last Judgment and the Kingdom" (Jeremias, 151-52).

On the other hand, "natural" growth does have something in common with a sudden miraculous transformation in that both are mysterious, God-given transformations. So perhaps the reference to growth functions analogically to that extent. Larry Hurtado states in *Mark*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989), 77: "The reference to the stages of growth (the stalk . . . the head . . . the full kernel in the head) does not refer to stages of church growth but simply elaborates the wonder of the mysterious, God-given result of the sower's work."

Another possibility is that the inaugurated kingdom "grows" in the sense its presence achieves over time God's unknown purposes, the fulfillment of which brings the consummation. In that view, the growth of the kingdom is not some kind of gradual transformation into the consummated state but the accomplishment by the inaugurated kingdom of purposes related to God's hidden timing of the consummation.

B. The mustard seed (Mat. 13:31-32; Mk. 4:30-32; Lk. 13:18-19)

The same point is made in the parable of the mustard seed, which Mark pairs with the parable of the growing seed. Jesus says in Mk. 4:30-32 (ESV): "*With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it?*"³¹ *It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth,*³² *yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."*

The mustard seed was proverbial for its smallness and was the smallest of all the seeds that were sown by Palestinian gardeners. The plant grows to a height of ten feet or more, which explains the nontechnical reference to it as a "tree" in Matthew and Luke. Snodgrass's explanation of the parable (2008, 225-226) is worth quoting at length:

Nearly all agree that this similitude addresses the implicit question about the unimpressive and unexpected nature of the kingdom Jesus claimed was

already present. . . . Was not the kingdom supposed to be a mighty display of God's defeat of evil and the removal of nations afflicting Israel? Jesus' miracles are nice, but where is the rest of the story? Such questions would have gone through the mind of many of Jesus' hearers, whether friend or foe. The Mustard Seed similitude urges, possibly warns, that no one should be put off by what appears unimpressive. Like the tiny mustard seed which grows to a large plant, so the kingdom is present, even if hidden, unnoticed, or ignored, and its full revelation with its benefits will come.

. . . The point is that what one sees with Jesus will lead to what one hopes for in the kingdom. The focus is on the *organic unity* between Jesus' present ministry in Israel and the coming kingdom of God. The end, the end that everyone knows and longs for, is already in the beginning, the beginning inaugurated by Jesus and now at work. What is at stake with this similitude is a restructuring of Jewish expectation. The kingdom, which has already begun with Jesus, does not come with a glorious bang and the defeat of Rome; rather, it comes unexpectedly, almost unnoticed. But all that is necessary is already there, and the end is present in the beginning. The focus on the birds dwelling in the branches or shade of the tree should not be lost, regardless of the origin of the idea. In the end the greatness and benefit of the kingdom will be a pleasant and wonderful reality.

Hultgren similarly states (p. 396-397):

The parable would most likely have been told in response to the question, How could the ministry of Jesus and his disciples have anything to do with the kingdom? The glorious kingdom of Israel's expectation has not arrived. The preaching and healing ministry of Jesus hardly seems significant enough as the dawn of a new age. The response to that charge is that one should look to the mustard seed. In spite of its small size, a great plant grows from it.

Donald Hagner in "Matthew's Parables of the Kingdom" in Richard N. Longenecker, ed., *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 114, summarizes the point of the parable (in Matthew) this way:

The point of the parable is simply the miracle of nature symbolized by a mustard seed, which develops from the smallest of beginnings to an astonishing fullness. In the same way, the kingdom has begun inconspicuously. Yet *it has begun!* And in the end its greatness, when compared to its size at its beginning, will provide as amazing a contrast as that between a mustard seed and a full-grown mustard plant.

Larry Hurtado states (p. 77):

The point of the parable is the *contrast* between the insignificant mustard seed and the fully grown plant that it produces, not the *process* involved. So, the lesson is not that the kingdom of God comes by quiet, prolonged growth, but rather that, though many might think the manifestation of the kingdom in Jesus' ministry insignificant, they would be proven wrong in the day of its full appearance.

C. The leaven (Mat. 13:33; Lk. 13:20-21)

The parable of the leaven occurs only in Matthew and Luke, and in both it is paired with the parable of the mustard seed, which suggests they convey the same meaning. Jesus says in Mat. 13:33 (ESV): *"The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened."*

Leaven is a more general term than yeast. In the ancient world, leaven was fermented dough that was kept back from baking and used to ferment the next batch of dough. Based on the Passover regulations, leaven often was viewed negatively, symbolizing the corrupting influence of sin, but it also had positive uses in various offerings prescribed in Scripture (Lev. 7:13-14, 23:17). Later Jewish literature used the image of leaven in a positive sense (Hultgren, 406), so the context must determine how it is being used. All indications in this parable are that it is being used positively.

There is some uncertainty about the size of the "measure" referred to here (Snodgrass [2008], 231-232), but "three measures of flour" probably would be 144 cups, which would weigh around forty pounds (Hultgren, 407). This would make forty good-sized loaves of bread, which would be sufficient to feed a hundred or more people. This suggests that the woman is preparing bread for a number of families in the community.

The similarity to the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the growing seed is obvious. Wenham states (p. 56): "The kingdom of God, which Jesus brought, seemed unimpressive to many people, but Jesus was setting in motion a powerful process which, though hidden at present, would as surely reach its intended goal as does the leaven in dough."

Snodgrass states (2008, 234-235):

[T]his similitude is directed at doubts concerning Jesus' proclamation of the presence of the kingdom. What people thought should be happening was not happening, even though parts of Jesus' ministry did fulfill expectations. . . . The point again is that what you see with Jesus is the beginning of what you hope for in the kingdom and will surely lead to it. The focus is not the contrast of small and large but the hidden beginning which will result in the completion of God's work in the kingdom, the leavening of the whole. Something has happened (note the aorists) and will have its full effect.

Hultgren states (p. 407): "On the essential interpretation of the parable there is widespread agreement. That is that the kingdom of God, though hidden, is an irresistible force inaugurated by God that will have its way and transform all of creation. It may seem hidden, and indeed is, but one can have confidence in God's will and power to bring it about."

Hagner states (p. 115):

Both [the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the leaven] speak of that which appears initially to be insignificant and of no consequence, but which in time produces an astonishing and dramatic effect. The kingdom of God is like yeast in this way. For although at its beginning it may look unimpressive, it will have an effect that is out of all proportion with that beginning.

D. The wheat and the weeds (Mat. 13:24-30, 36-43)

The parable of the wheat and the weeds appears only in Matthew. It is one of only three parables given a detailed, itemized explanation, the other two being the parable of the sower (Mat. 13:1-9, 18-23; Mk. 4:1-9, 13-20; Lk. 8:4-8, 11-15) and the parable of the net (Mat. 13:47-50).

Jesus says in Mat. 13:24-30 (ESV): *"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, ²⁵ but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. ²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. ²⁷ And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?' ²⁸ He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' So the servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' ²⁹ But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"*

The weed employed in this first-century equivalent of industrial sabotage almost certainly was darnel. It is a weed that looks very much like wheat, especially before maturity, and that often harbors a poisonous fungus. If it is harvested and ground together with wheat, the resulting flour is useless. Though such sabotage would be rare, the occasional feuding of rival farmers made it likely enough that Roman law specifically prohibited the practice (see, e.g., Snodgrass [2008], 198, 201; Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], 386-387).

It is assumed in the parable that the number of weeds far exceeded what would be expected to occur naturally; that is why the servants were surprised and how the master knew it was the work of an enemy. Given the vast number of weeds and how long the

wheat and weeds had been growing together, trying to pull the weeds out of the field at this point would pose too great a risk to the wheat. The master tells the servants to wait until the harvest to separate them because at that time the wheat would be full grown and the wheat and weeds would be easily distinguished. The weeds would be bundled and burned for fuel.

In Mat. 13:37-43 Jesus explains the meaning of the parable in response to the disciples' request (ESV): "*The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man.*³⁸ *The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one,*³⁹ *and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the close of the age, and the reapers are angels.*⁴⁰ *Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age.*⁴¹ *The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers,*⁴² *and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*⁴³ *Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.*"

Many think this parable is describing the church as a mixed community of good and evil and that Jesus is discouraging any attempt to root out evil in the church prior to God's final judgment. While it is sadly true that the church has a mixed character, it is quite unlikely this parable is speaking about that, at least not directly.

Various texts in Matthew make it clear that good and evil people and even false prophets can be recognized (e.g., Mat. 7:15-20, 12:33-37, 15:13-14), and Matthew records directions for disfellowshipping sinful brothers and sisters (Mat. 18:15-17). Moreover, Jesus says explicitly in Mat. 13:38 that "the field is the world," not the church. He says in v. 41 that angels will gather out of his "kingdom" all causes of sin and all law-breakers because, in the words of Rev. 11:15, at the consummation the kingdom of the world *becomes* the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. It simply is a way of saying that in the consummated kingdom sinners and the causes of sin, things that coexist with the presence of inaugurated kingdom, will have been stripped out.

The parable addresses doubts over Jesus' claims about the kingdom of God that arose from Jewish expectations about that kingdom. They thought that the coming of the kingdom would mean the immediate eradication of evil, the purging of sinners and the creation of a pure community. In light of Jesus' claim about the kingdom's presence, people wanted to know why the righteous and sinners were not being separated, why they were continuing to coexist in the world. In Snodgrass's words (2008, 206), this parable addressed the question "How can this be the kingdom if evil is still present?"

The "primary teaching of the parable is that the kingdom is present despite the presence of evil *and* that evil will be dealt with at the judgment" (Snodgrass [2008], 212). Hagner summarizes the meaning this way (p. 112-113):

In this world, even after the announcement of Jesus that the eschatological kingdom has already begun, those guilty of lawlessness –

that is, people who belong to the evil one – continue to coexist with the righteous, who are the people of God's kingdom. There has not been, nor will there be, a dramatic separation of the lawless from the righteous until the harvest at the end of the age. The present age is therefore one in which human society – and so even the church – is a mixture of those of the evil one and those of the kingdom. This can result in a confusing situation, especially when the wicked seem to prosper and the righteous suffer. But the ambiguity of the present situation is a temporary one, and with the end of the age it, too, will be brought to an end. Then, and only then, will there be a clear demarcation between these two classes of people, with each receiving their eschatological due: for the lawless, a dreadful punishment; for the righteous, extravagant blessedness.

Wenham states (p. 62):

[T]he parable of the wheat and the weeds, like others of the parables, makes it clear that the revolution of God comes in two stages, with a period of growth being followed by a decisive intervention at harvest time. What this parable adds to the others is the understanding, on the one hand, that the period of growth is a period when revolution and counter-revolution coexist uncomfortably together and, on the other hand, that the judgment and final triumph of the revolution will come only at the 'end' of the age.

III. Consummation of the Kingdom

A. The net (Mat. 13:47-50)

The parable of the net occurs only in Matthew. Jesus says in Mat. 13:47-50 (ESV): *"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. ⁴⁸ When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. ⁴⁹ So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."*

The net mentioned here (σαγήνη) is a vertically-hanging dragnet which would be pulled through the sea between two boats or be stretched out in a semi-circle by a single boat and then pulled to shore by ropes. It gathered up everything in its path as it was pulled in. Since Jewish law allowed only fish with scales and fins to be eaten (Lev. 11:9-12; Deut. 14:9-10), those without scales and fins (e.g., eels and catfish) would be "bad" in the sense they were ritually unclean.

The kingdom is analogous to the process of net (seine) fishing described in the parable in that just as that process culminates in the unclean fish being separated from the

clean and thrown away, so the kingdom will culminate in the unrighteous people being separated from the righteous and thrown into the fiery furnace. As Robert Mounce puts it in *Matthew*, Good News Commentary (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 136, "As fish are separated in the parable, so also will people be separated at the end of the age. That is the point of the parable." Snodgrass states (2008, 490-491):

Again we must remember that the kingdom is not like the net or any particular feature of the parable; the kingdom is like the whole process. Neither the net, the sea, the shore, the fishermen, or the vessels stand for anything. The kingdom is like the process of seine fishing, which at the end requires separation so that one keeps the valuable and discards the worthless. That is all. . . .

The primary concern of the parable is that separation will occur, that at the end the evil will be excluded from God's kingdom. That is not a new revelation, for any Jew hoping for the kingdom would believe that, but it was a confirmation from Jesus that his present kingdom would indeed lead to the time when evil would be obliterated. The sorting does not take place until the net is full and dragged on shore, until the end of the age. Neither the time of Jesus nor that of Matthew is the time for sorting, but it will take place.

Craig Blomberg states in *Matthew*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 224: "The parable of the dragnet . . . teaches the three-part message that God will judge all people on the last day, gather together the righteous for further service and safekeeping, and discard as worthless those who are unredeemed."

B. Workers in the vineyard (Mat. 20:1-16)

The parable of the workers in the vineyard occurs only at Mat. 20:1-16. Snodgrass (2008, 362) considers it one of the three most difficult parables Jesus told, so an extra dose of humility is in order when wrestling with this. I think the context of the parable in the Gospel of Matthew is the key to understanding it.

Matthew 19:16-22 is the account of Jesus' conversation with the rich young man. Jesus tells him in v. 21 (ESV), "*If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.*" The man went away sorrowful, and Jesus tells his disciples in Mat. 19:23-26 that it is very difficult for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. That is followed by this exchange between Peter and Jesus in Mat. 19:27-30 (ESV): *Then Peter said in reply, "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?"*²⁸ *Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.*²⁹ *And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.*³⁰ *But many who are first will be last, and the last first."*

Peter wants to know what heavenly treasure the Twelve will receive in light of their renunciation of all things. Jesus tells them that "in the new world" they will sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel, and then he adds that everyone who has renounced worldly things to follow him will receive blessings in excess of what they surrendered along with eternal life. He then says in v. 30, "But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

The object to which the proverb in v. 30 refers is crucial because the parable of the workers in the vineyard is an elaboration on that statement. That is apparent from the fact the parable begins in the very next verse (20:1) with an explanatory "For" and ends (20:16) with "So the last will be first, and the first last," which is a rephrasing of 19:30.

I think the proverb in 19:30 is focused primarily on the honors or privileges Christians will receive in the eternal state above and beyond eternal life (sitting at the Lord's right or left). I think it relates to *Christians* because Jesus is addressing his disciples (Mat. 19:23). But more importantly, Peter's question in 19:27 is about the honors or privileges (the treasure in heaven from 19:21) that are in store for the Twelve in light of the fact they had left everything and followed Jesus. Jesus' response in 19:28-29 refers explicitly to those who have followed him and everyone who has renounced relationships and things for his name's sake. Verse 30 is connected with a contrasting conjunction ("But") and naturally relates to that same group, namely Christians.

I think it relates primarily to honors or privileges *in the eternal state* because Jesus told the rich man that with the surrender of his possessions he would have treasure *in heaven*, suggesting something other than reward in this earthly life. In reply to that, Peter asked Jesus what they who had left everything would have, meaning have *in heaven*. On top of that, Jesus refers specifically to what will be theirs "in the new world" (or "the regeneration" [KJV, ASV, NAU] or "the renewal of all things" [NRS, NIV, TNIV]). This phrase is widely recognized as a reference to the consummated kingdom, the eschatological hope of the new heavens and new earth.

D. A. Carson declares in "Matthew" in Frank E. Gaebelin, ed., *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:425, "Here [the word *palingenesia*] has to do with the consummation of the kingdom." Craig Blomberg states in *Matthew* (1992, 300-301): "Here the concept [of "regeneration" or "new birth"] reflects a completely Jewish background (cf. Isa. 65:17; 66:22; and in the New Testament, 2 Pet 3:10-13; Rev 21-22). Nothing less than new heavens and a new earth await Christ's followers after he returns in glory." Donald Hagner states in *Matthew 14-28*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 565, "παλιγγενεσία, which literally means 'rebirth' or 'regeneration' . . . refers here to the eschatological renewal of the world at the end of the present age . . ." And R. T. France states (p. 742-743), "In 25:31-46 the scene is apparently of the final judgment, and that eschatological perspective seems required here, too, by the term *hē palingenesia*, 'the rebirth' (translated 'new age' above), a term . . . which aptly sums up the OT eschatological hope of 'new heavens and a new earth' (Isa 65:17; 66:22, etc.)."

Mark 10:30 and Lk. 18:30 make clear that disciples will receive a hundredfold blessing *in the present age*, but Matthew's omission of those words favors the notion that the emphasis picked up by the following parable is on their honor or privilege in "the new world." The enunciated principle would apply to God's rewards generally, now and in the consummation, but Matthew appears to be signaling that the parable is focused on the latter.

Jesus seems to be saying in v. 30, "Yes, Peter, there are honors or privileges in the eschaton, treasure in heaven, for those who renounce worldly things in following me, *but* those honors or privileges often will not be allocated in accordance with human assessments of entitlement. On the contrary, reversals of expectations will be common." I will not explore the statement in v. 28b that "you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" because it is not key to interpreting the parable. Let me just say that I think the idea is that at the consummation when Jesus sits on his judgment throne (Mat. 25:31) the Twelve, as representatives of true Israel, the Israel of faith, will in some capacity judge the unbelieving physical descendants of Israel for their lack of faith in God's Messiah.

Jesus says in Mat. 20:1-16 (ESV): *"For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴ and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' ⁵ So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. ⁶ And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' ⁷ They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' ⁸ And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' ⁹ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. ¹⁰ Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, ¹² saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' ¹³ But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first last."*

The hiring of day laborers is something that would have been commonplace, but the repeated hirings throughout the day simply is part of the setup for the point of the parable. In real life, the owner would better calculate his needs and not incrementally add to his workforce over eleven hours.

A denarius was the average daily wage for a day laborer, but it was a very modest amount. Usual estimates put the poverty line at an income of 200 denarii per year, and as

Snodgrass notes (2008, 370), that level of annual income "would hardly do more than keep a small family from going under." It is perhaps comparable to our "minimum wage," but probably less given the differences in standards of living.

Many are convinced the parable is about the remarkable grace God gives to undeserving sinners, but it is an elaboration on or illustration of the proverb in 19:30, which as I explained, seems to relate to what is in store for Christians. If so, the parable should not be read as addressing the principle by which God saves sinners but as addressing the principle by which God allocates rewards among Christians, even if the two are the same.

A key to the parable is that when those who were hired first saw that those hired last received a denarius, the amount for which those hired first had agreed to work, they *expected* to receive more because they had done more work. They would have been perfectly content to receive a denarius but for the fact people who did less work also received one. They were angry because the Master did not elevate them above or distinguish them from other workers based on their extra work, and they charged the Master with wrongdoing in treating them all equally.

I think the point is that the disciples will be blessed with glorious eternal life at the eschaton, but the giving of special honors or privileges in that state (such as sitting at the Lord's right and left) often will not comport with human notions of entitlement (the first being first and the last being last). All labor will be rewarded, but God is free (meaning he is not unjust) to give as he chooses (the same or more) to one who did not labor as long or under as difficult conditions. He blesses based on his generosity not on human notions of entitlement, so the door is wide open for surprises, reversals of expectations, for which he cannot rightly be criticized. France (p. 746) expresses the idea this way (in commenting on 19:30):

Those whose renunciation has put them at the forefront of the Jesus movement might naturally expect to be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, as their question at 18:1 has shown, but there is no such guarantee. Those who have borne the greatest weight of loyal service for the kingdom of heaven cannot assume that their reward will be greater than that of others (20:1-15). In the kingdom of heaven nobody earns their status, even by spectacular renunciation. They may rightly expect a reward, but not necessarily the reward of preeminence. The kingdom of heaven, which operates by divine grace rather than by human achievement, is a great leveler.

I think Jesus tells this to the disciples because at least some of them were unduly interested in their status in relation to other disciples. In Mat. 18:1 they are interested in who is the greatest in the kingdom, and in Mat. 20:20-21 James and John, through their mother, request to sit (on the thrones – 19:28) at Jesus' right and left in his kingdom, positions of relative honor. Peter's statement and question in Mat. 19:27 likely carries the assumption that they are most worthy of heavenly rewards.

Jesus wants them to know that they are unable to secure preeminence in the eternal kingdom because their expectations of who should be elevated are not reliable indicators of who will be. God in his generosity may justly honor someone who does not fit their expectations, their criteria of reward, so it is pointless in terms of seeking preeminence to focus on the labor of other disciples as a standard or motivation for their own labor. Just labor for the Lord free of the desire to secure a larger crown than your brother, and leave the rewards to the goodness of God.

In light of their interest in preeminence over one another, Jesus warns them in Mat. 20:25-27 against seeking to rule over the others. That is the opposite of greatness in the kingdom, which is measured by being a servant and slave to the other apostles. So ruling over others in this world would be the last way to create an expectation of elevation in the eschaton.

C. The faithful or unfaithful servant (Mat. 24:45-51; Lk. 12:42-46)

The parable of the faithful or unfaithful servant is reported in Matthew and Luke, which may refer to two different occasions. In both Gospels, however, it is addressed to the disciples and is spoken in the context of Jesus' declaration about his future coming. More specifically, Jesus is urging them to be continually faithful, not to lapse in their loyalty, because they will not know when to expect him. In Matthew 24:44, the verse immediately prior to the parable, Jesus says, "Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

Jesus then says in Mat. 24:45-51 (ESV): *"Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? ⁴⁶ Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. ⁴⁷ Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. ⁴⁸ But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed,' ⁴⁹ and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, ⁵⁰ the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know ⁵¹ and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."*

Jesus is preparing his followers for the time after his death. Hultgren states (p. 159):

The parable is remarkably clear, and interpreters are generally in agreement about its essential message. The wise or faithful slave or manager will attend to the duties assigned by the master who is temporarily away, knowing that in the end an accounting will take place. If, on the other hand, that person abuses the trust placed in him or her, he or she will suffer severe consequences. Just so, the disciple of Jesus who is wise and faithful will attend to those duties entrusted – or face condemnation at the parousia of the Son of man.

Wenham states (p. 77):

The general force of the parable is quite clear: the disciples are servants awaiting their Lord's return, the time of which is unknown. The choice is to be prudent and faithful servants, doing the Lord's will and ready for his return at any time, or to be disobedient and dissolute, reckoning on the master's absence; the outcome will be great reward or fearful judgment.

France states (p. 1000):

In the present Gospel text the parable is transparently about the disciples' responsibility to be faithful on the job, fulfilling the task allocated by the Lord until such time as the Lord comes. The time of the Lord's absence is to be marked by unfaltering service that can pass scrutiny at whatever moment the Lord should turn up.

The fact the master in the parable comes when the wicked servant is living contrary to the master's desires, that he catches him being wicked, represents the foolish and grave risk the unfaithful incur given that Jesus may return at "any time" (which I distinguish from "any moment").⁴ The story is an encouragement to steadfast faithfulness. It shows that betraying the master's trust during his absence is as foolish as playing Russian roulette by showing what happens when one's assumption of safety

⁴ The fact God has revealed that certain things will precede the Second Coming (which things, in my opinion, include the rise of Antichrist and the accompanying rebellion and deception [2 Thess. 2:1-10; 1 Jn. 2:18, 4:3; Revelation 13, 19:11-21]) does not eliminate the possibility that Jesus may come "at any time," if "time" is understood as a short *period* of time rather than as a specific moment. As Douglas Moo explains in Gleason L. Archer and others, *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulational?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 209-210:

Within the New Testament there are indications that suggest that New Testament authors could not have intended to portray the Parousia as an event that could happen "at any moment." For, first of all, Jesus in His teaching rather frequently suggests that there will be a *delay* before His return (Luke 19:11-27; Matt. 24:45-51; 25:5, 19). Second, and more important, are *specific* predictions that could not have been fulfilled if Christ had returned immediately after his ascension. Thus Jesus promises His disciples that they *will* be His witnesses "in Jerusalem, in all of Judea, in Samaria and unto the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The gospel *must* be preached to all nations before the end comes (Matt. 24:14); Peter will die a martyr's death *as an old man* (John 21:18-19); Paul *will* preach the Gospel in Rome (Acts 23:11; 27:24). It is not sufficient to say that all these *could* have been fulfilled in the first century and therefore represent no barrier to an "any moment" Rapture *now*. For the point is to determine what the statements about the nearness of the Parousia would have meant to those who first heard them. If the original speakers did not intend and the original hearers did not understand a particular statement to require an "any-moment" interpretation, that statement can hardly have such a meaning *now*.

Therefore, it does not appear that the imminence of the return of Christ can be understood in an "any-moment" sense. . . . It is better to define *imminency* as the possibility of Jesus' coming for His people *at any time* – "time" being understood broadly as a short *period* of time. It is in light of that "any-time" coming that the church is called upon to live out its calling.

proves false. The one who maintains awareness that the gun may fire on any pull of the trigger abstains from the foolish conduct and thus is guaranteed to be spared the tragedy.

Awareness of the uncertainty of one's time of death likewise can serve as an encouragement to steadfast faithfulness, as is evident in the parable of the rich man in Lk. 12:16-21, but that awareness is not a substitute for an awareness that the Lord may return at any time. Christians are to live in expectation of that return. Here is how Douglas Moo puts it in *The Letter of James*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 224:

With the death and resurrection of Jesus and pouring out of the Spirit, the "last days" have been inaugurated. This final age of salvation will find its climax in the return of Christ in glory. But – and here is the crucial point – the length of the age is unknown. Not even Jesus knew how long the "last days" would last (cf. Mark 13:32). What this means is that the return of Christ, as the next event in the salvation-historical timetable, is, from the time of the early church to our own day, "near," or "imminent." Every generation of Christians lives (or should live!) with the consciousness that the *parousia* could occur at any time and that one needs to make decisions and choose values based on that realization. So it was as true in James's day as it is in ours: we need to *be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near*.

Robert Shank writes in *Until: The Coming of Messiah and His Kingdom* (Springfield, MO: Westcott Publishers, 1982), 395-396:

Said a professor of theology whom I know

The apostolic Church believed Christ would return in their day. He did not, and they were wrong. Other generations of the Church believed that Christ would come in their day, but time proved them all wrong. If we expect Christ to return in our day, time will no doubt prove us wrong.

Not at all. In every generation of the Church, all who expected Christ to return in their time were right, and all who did not were wrong, terribly *wrong*. Christ, the apostles, and the entire NT enjoin upon us no other attitude than to expect Jesus to return in our time. Whether he returns in our day is God's responsibility; whether we expect his return is our responsibility, for which we must give account. Whether he returns in our generation or not, we are wrong if we fail to expect him. In every generation of the Church, "the Lord is at hand." This is the time frame of the NT, including the Revelation.

Referring specifically to this parable, Snodgrass states (2008, 504), "Christian faith is always faith on tiptoe, looking to that day, and because of that day, living in accord with such anticipation."

The penalty meted out to the servant who abused the master's trust is horrific, as evidenced both by the description and the reference to weeping and gnashing of teeth. Weeping and gnashing of teeth consistently "denotes end-time exclusion from the blessings of God" (Snodgrass [2008], 503). Whether his being cut in two (or into pieces) is hyperbole for some kind of severe physical punishment short of death is debated, but if it is hyperbole it only underscores the severity of the judgment. He is put in the place of the hypocrites (or unbelievers in Luke's account).

Some are convinced the parable is directed more specifically to Christian leaders based on the fact the servant's responsibility is to care for the other servants by seeing that they are fed (e.g., Wenham, 78-80). I tend to agree with Snodgrass (2008, 501) that "the parable more likely addresses the broader group of Jesus' followers, not merely leaders or the Twelve." See also, France (p. 1000).

Luke in 12:47-48 includes the statement, *"And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. ⁴⁸ But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more."*

Having depicted graphically the severity of the punishment meted out to the servant who abused the master's trust, I think Jesus is here reinforcing his call to steadfastness by driving home a principle behind that severity. The greater one's awareness of the master's will and the greater the responsibility one has been given, the greater one's culpability for unfaithfulness and thus the greater one's punishment. In other words, apostasy is worse than unbelief, so it is the gravest of all matters.

Kenneth Boa and Robert Bowman, Jr. state in *Sense & Nonsense About Heaven & Hell* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 104, "Non-Christians may be interested to know that the punishment of Hell will be especially severe on professing Christians who belie their profession by their actions. Jesus' parable of the slave who knew his master's will but ignored it getting many lashes makes this point."

As Peter states in 2 Pet. 2:20-22 (ESV): *For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. ²¹ For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. ²² What the true proverb says has happened to them: "The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire."*

The greater culpability of an apostate relative to an unbeliever is illustrated by the greater culpability of one servant relative to *another servant* (but note that the second is not expressly identified as a servant) because only a servant would be accountable to an earthly master. Without them both being servants, they could not both be subject to the master's judgment. All mankind is accountable to God and thus his "servant" in that sense. The Christian corresponds to the one to whom much was given and the one to whom much was entrusted.

Note that this implies there are degrees of punishment in hell. Craig Blomberg states (1990, 192), "The concept of different punishments for different sins is well-anchored in the Old Testament and intertestamental literature. These verses [Lk. 12:47-48] rank among the clearest in all the Bible in support of degrees of punishment in hell." See also Mat. 11:21-24 where Jesus says it will be more tolerable for Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom in the day of judgment than for Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum. Robert Peterson states in *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995), 199:

Although the Bible does not answer every question we might want to ask about degrees of punishment in hell, the main outlines are clear. Because God is just, he will punish the wicked exactly as they deserve; unbelievers will suffer gradations of punishment in hell. An important point to remember, however, is that hell will be terrible for each of its occupants. Nevertheless, it will be more terrible for some and most terrible for others.

D. The ten virgins (Mat. 25:1-13)

The parable of the ten virgins (or maidens or bridesmaids) occurs only at Mat. 25:1-13. It comes immediately after the parable of the faithful or unfaithful servant, which urges the disciples to steadfast faithfulness during the Lord's absence in light of the uncertainty of the time of the Lord's return. That parable ends with a depiction of the unfaithful servant being severely punished at the master's return. The parable of the ten virgins links to that judgment scene by its opening: "Then (or at that time) . . ."

Jesus says (ESV): "*Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, ⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵ As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. ⁶ But at midnight there was a cry, 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' ⁷ Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' ⁹ But the wise answered, saying, 'Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.' ¹⁰ And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. ¹¹ Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' ¹² But*

he answered, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.' ¹³ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

The role of the virgins is not entirely clear, but it seems they are at the home of the bridegroom (or his family) waiting to go out to meet him so as to provide a lighted escort for him and the wedding party to the bridegroom's home. They may have had an ongoing role inside the home, such as providing lighting for the wedding party. (Note that it is possible the light sources are torches instead of lamps.) This apparently was an assigned role in the wedding that was a significant social responsibility, one that the families properly counted on them to discharge.

The girls reported for their assignment but only five of them brought extra oil, which means that only five of them did what was necessary to be prepared for the groom's late arrival. When the groom finally arrived, they were ready but the others were not. Their readiness resulted in their being included in the feast, whereas the others' lack of readiness resulted in their being excluded.

The kingdom is analogous to the situation described in the parable in that only those who are ready to meet Christ when he returns will enter the delight of the consummated kingdom of God. Those who are not ready will be shut out of God's presence (see 2 Thess. 1:9-10). R. T. France states in "On Being Ready" in Richard N. Longenecker, ed., *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 183:

The effect of the story, then, is to stress the need to be ready for a "coming" that will be at an unexpected time. Furthermore, the story suggests that among those who to all outward appearances were all in the same category (i.e., ten girls sleeping together by the roadside) there is, in fact, a fundamental division between those who were ready and those who were unready, and that this division has eternal consequences for their contrasting destinies – that is, either sharing the feast with the bridegroom or wailing unavailingly outside the closed door.

In the parable of the Bridegroom in their midst in Mk. 2:18-20 (Mat. 9:14-15; Lk. 5:33-35), Jesus' present ministry was compared to a wedding feast, with its associations with the kingdom of God, but here it is the future or consummated kingdom that is compared to a wedding feast. Wenham (p. 81) comments:

This could at first sight seem surprising and even contradictory. But in fact a characteristic of Jesus' kingdom teaching is that he sometimes speaks of the kingdom being present in his ministry and yet at other times he urges his disciples to pray, 'Your kingdom come.' The explanation of this is not, as some have suggested, that the gospel record has mixed up and confused what Jesus said, but rather that Jesus did indeed believe that in one sense the revolution had come in his ministry and that in another sense it was

still to come. The growth parables help to explain this: sowing and reaping are part of the same process and yet quite distinct from one another.

The parable does not say what constitutes readiness in terms of Christ's return, but elsewhere it is clear that readiness involves steadfast faithfulness, continuing to live in light of the conviction that Jesus is Lord and Savior. A life lived that way is a life prepared for the Lord's return whenever that should happen. The fact the foolish virgins were unable to borrow from the wise may simply be dramatic storytelling, but it also may point to the truth that one cannot piggyback on the spiritual readiness of another at Christ's return.

Some people try to make something out of the allegedly selfish conduct of the wise virgins in not sharing their oil, but that misreads both the situation painted in the parable and how parables function. Snodgrass (2008, 517) states:

Such charges betray an insensitivity both to the situation depicted and how stories function. If the oil the wise brought for their lamps was divided with the foolish, all the lamps would go out, and the celebration could not proceed in the dark. More to the point, these complaints show a dismal failure to understand how parables work. Parable and reality are not connected with equal signs. Parables are not direct pictures of reality and do not claim to portray life as it should be. They only partially map the realities they seek to reveal.

The fact the virgins slept while waiting for the groom carries no negative connotation in this parable, for both the wise and foolish ones slept. The wise had prepared beforehand so their sleeping in no way diminished their "being alert," which is the sense of the command "Watch" in v. 13. France (2000, 181) comments:

During that delay all the girls go to sleep, not merely the foolish ones. So readiness does not consist in living in a constant state of "red alert." Life must go on in the interim; and the provision for the *parousia* of Jesus depends rather on having made preparation beforehand so that one can safely go to sleep, secure in the knowledge that when the time comes everything will be in place.

E. The talents and the minas (Mat. 25:14-30; Lk. 19:11-27)

The parable of the talents in Mat. 25:14-20 and the parable of the minas ("pounds" in some versions) in Lk. 19:11-27 are variations of a parable that Jesus told at different times. Though some scholars reject that suggestion, claiming that the differences are the result of later alterations of a single original parable, I think France (2000, 184) puts the matter well:

It is remarkable how resistant some New Testament scholars are to the possibility that Jesus, in the course of several months or even years of public ministry, may have used and reused similar material a number of times with different audiences for different purposes. Any preacher could have told them that this is the most natural scenario in the world!

The parable of the ten virgins speaks of the kingdom in terms of being ready to meet Christ when he returns to consummate it. The parable of the talents begins immediately after the parable of the ten virgins and continues the reference to the kingdom with the opening words "For *it* will be like . . ."

The parable in Mat. 25:14-30 is about a very wealthy man going on a long journey who entrusted large sums of money to three of his servants (or slaves). To one he gave five talents, to another two talents, and to another one talent. A talent originally was a unit of weight that, based on the value of that weight of gold or silver, by the first century had become a unit of monetary value. A talent was equal to about 6,000 denarii, and a denarius was the standard day's wage for a day laborer. So a talent was worth about 20 years wages for a day laborer (who might work around 300 days per year).

The fact the money was allotted to each servant according to his ability shows that it was not given for safekeeping but to be used to create a profit. This would have been understood by the servants in Matthew as is evident from the fact the first two servants "traded with" the money given to them. It is made explicit in Lk. 19:13 where the master tells the servants "Engage in business until I come."

Regarding the potential for increase, Craig Keener states in *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 117:

Those with sufficient capital could invest it at a profit; for instance, they could lend it to moneychangers who would use it to turn a profit and give them a substantial share. Lending money at interest was also profitable, given the exorbitant interest rates of the period (although Jewish people were not to charge interest to fellow Jews); one patron is reported to have lent to an entire city at roughly 50 percent interest! Because most people did not have capital available for investment, those who did could reap large profits.

The master returns after a long absence and calls the servants to account for their handling of what he entrusted to them. He is pleased with the first two servants who doubled his money by putting it to work. Keener remarks (1993, 117), "Doubling one's investment was normal, and the servants should have been able to accomplish this." The master commends them both, promises to bless them, and invites them to enter into his joy.

The third servant then comes forward and says (vv. 24-25), "*Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed,*²⁵ *so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.*" This servant hid the master's money to keep it safe rather than use it to gain a profit as the master intended and then blamed the master for his unproductive inactivity by saying the master is so ruthless in matters of wealth that he was afraid to risk putting the money to work.

The master is having none of it. Matthew 25:26-30 states (ESV): *But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed?'²⁷ Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest.²⁸ So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents.²⁹ For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.³⁰ And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'*

He calls the servant wicked and lazy, the opposite of the two good and faithful servants, and turns the servant's accusation back on him. If the servant really thought the master was ruthless in matters of wealth he would have feared making zero profit and at least have made a safe investment with a bank for a minimal gain. Keener (1993, 117) states, "The smallest possible investment, providing interest on a savings deposit, could not have endangered the deposit; it would have been as safe as burying the money." The fact he did not do that exposes his accusation as a rationalization, as does the conduct of the other two servants, and shows that he has no commitment to the master's affairs.

This servant's one talent is taken from him, which probably symbolizes the finality of the situation and the severing of his relationship with the master. The fact it is given to the one with ten talents, the one who most effectively accomplished the master's purpose, is meant to reinforce the blessing of faithful service, not to convey anything negative about the other faithful servant. The worthless servant is then cast into outer darkness, which is an image for hell (e.g., Mat. 8:12), a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The point is again the need for the disciples to be faithful during the Lord's absence. As the servants were entrusted with wealth, Jesus' disciples, as subjects of the kingdom, have been entrusted with privileges and opportunities. France (2000, 187) states, "When the master goes away, it is their responsibility not to wait in pious idleness but to get on with the job he has entrusted to them. He will leave behind great potential. But he expects that potential to be developed through the faithful discipleship of his people." He concludes his review of the parable with these words (2000, 189):

The Parable of the Talents, therefore, develops the theme of "being ready" by spelling out a little more concerning what is expected of disciples in the period before their Lord returns. Just as the slave of 24:46 was commended and rewarded for being hard at work when his master

returned, so this parable calls followers of Jesus to responsible activity – or, in the imagery of the parable itself, to maximize one's potential for the benefit of the kingdom of heaven. And just as the five wise bridesmaids were not caught out because they had already made sure of their oil supply, so followers of Jesus are expected not to sit and watch but to make preparations. Our "readiness" consists in having faithfully and boldly discharged our responsibilities as disciples, whether they have been small or great. It is the master who allocates the scale of responsibility; it is the slave's responsibility to carry out faithfully the role that has been entrusted.

This does not mean, of course, that one achieves one's salvation by works. Rather, it means that faith is visible; it produces works. Biblical faith is not mere intellectual assent but the "yes" of one's total being, a surrender that necessarily and inevitably finds expression in one's life. As Daniel B. Wallace says in *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 219: "Both James and Paul would agree, I believe, with the statement: 'Faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is not alone.'"

Douglas Moo writes in his commentary on James in the Pillar New Testament Commentary series (p. 43):

Christians need to continue to pay attention to the warning of James that true faith is to be tested by its works and that only a faith that issues in works is genuinely saving faith. James recognizes that Christians continue to sin (3:2), so he clearly does not expect 100 percent conformity to the will of God. But how high must the percentage be? How many works are necessary to validate true, saving faith? James, of course, gives no answer. But what we can say with confidence on the basis of James's teaching is that the claim of anyone who is totally unconcerned to lead a life of obedience to God to have saving faith must be questioned.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the young German (Lutheran) pastor and seminary teacher who was executed by the Nazis, wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 47:

Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves.

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Costly grace . . . is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble, it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.

The version of the parable in Lk. 19:11-27 differs in a number of ways. The man leaving is a nobleman who is going to a distant country to have himself appointed king.

He calls ten servants and gives them each a mina, which is about three months' wages for a day laborer. The nobleman's potential subjects, a group distinct from his servants, hated him and sent a delegation after him to lobby against his appointment as king, but he was made king anyway. When he returned, he called his servants to account for how they had handled the money he had entrusted to them.

Only three servants are discussed because that is sufficient to depict the nature of the accounting. The actions of these three and the judgment of them parallels that of the three servants in the parable of the talents, though the negative judgment on the wicked servant is expressed simply by his mina being taken from him. As I said, that probably symbolizes the finality of the situation and the severing of his relationship with the master.

After reckoning with his servants, the king orders that his enemies, those who hated him and opposed his kingship, be executed before him. The version of the parable in Luke has some definite parallels with what happened following the death of Herod the Great in 4 B.C.

Herod willed his mini-empire to three of his sons. Herod Antipas was given Galilee. This is the Herod who had John the Baptist beheaded and who tried the Lord Jesus before sending him back to Pilate. Herod the Great left Judea and Samaria to his son Archelaus and bequeathed to him the title king. When Archelaus journeyed to Rome to have his position over Judea and Samaria approved, a delegation of Jews and Samaritans followed him to lobby against his appointment. Archelaus's rulership was nevertheless confirmed by the Romans, but with the title ethnarch rather than king. "Although no explicit report of Archelaus's vengeance exists, Josephus refers to 'old feuds' and Archelaus's brutality" (Snodgrass [2008], 537).

It is hard to believe Jesus' audience would not see an allusion to Archelaus, especially given that Archelaus's palace had been in Jericho, the city Jesus had just left. If so, that part of the parable probably is an indictment of unbelieving Jews for resisting the Messiah *as if he were* Archelaus (Snodgrass [2008], 537). Their condemnation at the judgment is expressed graphically to underscore its gravity, and it represents the condemnation of all who reject the king.

The fact that the faithful servants in both versions of the parable are rewarded at the judgment with greater service and responsibility may say something about the nature of the consummated kingdom. Wenham remarks (p .88):

Christians have sometimes pictured heaven as a state of rather passive adoration. Jesus in the parables of the pounds and the talents, as in that of the steward, speaks of the faithful being rewarded in the kingdom with the privilege of greater service and responsibility. The perfect peace of God's revolution is not sleep, but is life wonderfully renewed and relationships restored (the *shalom* of the Old Testament) – a life of joy and service in God's presence (cf. Rev 7:15).

F. The sheep and the goats (Mat. 25:31-46)

The parable of the sheep and the goats occurs only in Mat. 25:31-46. It is not a parable proper but a two-verse analogy (vv. 32-33) to the separation that will take place at the final judgment. The analogy is incorporated into the description of the judgment at Christ's return. The separation is depicted by the analogy and then the following verses (vv. 34-46) explain the reason for and the significance of the separation.

Jesus says in Mat. 25:31-46 (ESV): *"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' ⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' ⁴¹ Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."*

When Jesus returns to consummate the kingdom he inaugurated with his first coming, all the nations, meaning all the people of all the nations, will be separated into two groups: the sheep and the goats. As David Turner notes (p. 608-609), "This passage . . . evidently assumes, rather than mentions, a resurrection (cf. Acts 17:31; Rom. 14:10-12; 1 Cor. 15:51-57; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 20:11-15)."

Mixed flocks were common because it was economical to work with only one herd and because the more restless goats tended to keep the herd on the move thereby producing more effective grazing in sparsely vegetated areas. At various times, however, it no doubt was necessary to separate the two.

Sheep are a regular Old Testament image for God's people (e.g., Ps. 74:1, 78:52, 79:12-13; Jer. 23:1; Ezek. 34:11), but goats are not. So it is not surprising that the sheep

are put on the Lord's right and the goats on his left. In Jewish culture, as in many others, right and left frequently symbolize favor and disfavor, respectively.

The one group, the sheep on the right, is blessed by the Father in that they now take their inheritance, the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world. Note that the term inheritance presupposes a relationship with the Father (e.g., Rom. 8:15-17; Rev. 21:7). This will be helpful when considering the basis of the judgment. They are to receive or inherit a place in the consummated kingdom, a realm in total harmony with God's perfect will. Verse 46 specifies that life in this perfect realm will be eternal (see Rev. 21:1-4). This glorious inheritance was the Father's plan for the sheep from the beginning.

The other group, the goats on the left, are cursed and sent into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. Verse 46 refers to this state as eternal punishment. However figuratively one takes the various images of hell in Scripture, what cannot be missed is that it is the ultimate bummer, a place that any person in his right mind would avoid at any cost.

The deciding factor in who went where is, at the first level, quite obvious: those who had compassion and mercy on "the least of these brothers" of the Lord inherit the kingdom and those who did not are punished eternally in the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. This certainly does not mean that the compassionate and merciful person who does not believe in Christ will be saved. The entire N.T. is clear that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ, not on the basis of our response to human need. Thus, the real question is how the listed acts of mercy and compassion relate to faith in Jesus Christ. The answer to that depends on how one understands "least of these *brothers* of mine."

Many understand the phrase to refer to all who are hungry, distressed, or needy. In this view, Jesus is saying that if we do not love those in need, our claim to have faith is false. See, Lk. 6:46; 1 Jn. 2:3-5; Jas. 2:17. The weakness of this view is that there is no other place in which the term "brothers" of Jesus refers to men in general. Mat. 12:48-50, 23:8, and 28:10 all use the term for his disciples. In addition, the word "least" (*elachistōn*) is used as the superlative of "little" (*mikros*), and "little [ones]" (*mikroi*) always refers in Matthew to disciples (10:42, 18:6, 10, 14; see also 5:19, 11:11).

Many recent scholars therefore argue, in line with most scholars throughout church history, that Jesus is specifically identifying himself with his disciples. This group includes D. A. Carson, Donald Hagner, Craig Blomberg, Leon Morris, Craig Keener, and David Turner. The point then becomes that mercy and compassion toward Jesus' disciples is an indication that they have accepted the gospel and stand with Christ. They have joined the revolution and identify with its participants. Mat. 10:40-42 is a parallel idea. Note also Acts 9:4-5, 22:7-8.

Of course, biblical/saving faith produces mercy and compassion for the poor and oppressed generally (Mat. 22:39; Gal. 2:10) and good deeds toward all people (Gal.

6:10), but since Christians are to be especially concerned about the household of faith (Gal. 6:10) acts of kindness and mercy toward fellow Christians are a kind of "first order" fruit of faith. However else saving faith will manifest itself, a faith that is callous to the needs and suffering of the King's brothers is not saving faith. (In this light, those in prison refers to Christians imprisoned for their faith as occurred throughout Acts and the rest of the New Testament.)

The surprise of both groups is not over the place where they are assigned but over the statement that they had treated or failed to treat *Jesus* a certain way. In the portrayal neither group realizes that Jesus identifies with the least of his disciples to such an extent that what is done or not done for *them* is done or not done for *him*.

The lack of realization on the part of the righteous is curious in light of the fact Jesus is here making clear that what is done to the least of his brothers is done to him. Given this teaching, how can they not understand when he says on judgment day that they gave *him* something to eat, something to drink, etc. (vv. 35-36) that he is referring to their acts of kindness toward *his brothers*?

Some think this supports the idea that "brothers of mine" does not refer to disciples. The thinking is that the righteous were unaware that Jesus identified with the people they served because those people were not disciples. But that simply relocates the problem. If Jesus is here teaching that he identifies with needy people in general, then how can the righteous not know at judgment that they served Jesus in serving needy non-disciples?

Others think this supports the idea that Christians served other Christians without any conscious thought of Jesus' identification with them and thus were doing so from a motive untainted by any calculation of self-benefit. But if being aware that Jesus identifies with the least of his brothers risks tainting one's service with a motive of self-benefit, why would Jesus so clearly teach that he identifies with the least of his brothers? He seems to be teaching about the identification to encourage brotherly kindness and mercy, which makes it difficult to believe that acts done from an awareness of that identification are somehow invalid or less noble.

My guess is that the answering "righteous" in v. 37 refers to only some of the righteous. Certainly there will be Christians on judgment day who showed kindness and mercy to other Christians without being aware that Jesus identifies with his disciples or without being aware of the extent to which he does so. Jesus highlights them as spokesmen of the group in this symbolic portrayal of judgment because their lack of awareness provides the opportunity to emphasize his identification with his brothers for purposes of present instruction so as to encourage brotherly kindness en route to the judgment.

IV. The Kingdom Is Good News for the Needy

A. The two debtors (Lk. 7:41-43)

The parable of the two debtors occurs only in Lk. 7:41-43. Luke tells us that a Pharisee, who we learn in v. 40 is named Simon, invited Jesus to have dinner with him at his house. We are not told the reason for the invitation, but clearly Simon was aware of Jesus' reputation as a prophet (7:39), whatever reservations he may have had about the claim. Perhaps social custom dictated that a visiting religious teacher be included on the guest list or maybe Simon was just curious.

The fact they reclined at the meal indicates it was a relatively formal occasion, perhaps a banquet following a gathering at the synagogue. Reclining was the normal position for eating special meals. Each person would lie on his side, propped up on his left elbow, with his head near the low table on which the food was placed and his body and legs angling away from the table. Such special meals were semi-public in the sense the door was left open and uninvited guests could enter, sit by the walls, and hear the conversation (see, Wenham, 96; Snodgrass [2008], 83, and Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1 – 9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994], 694).

Pharisees were a sect or party within the Jewish religion that was noted for its piety and its concern for ritual purity. Paul, a former Pharisee, described the group (Acts 26:5) as the strictest sect of the Jewish religion. The name "Pharisee" in all likelihood conveyed the idea of "separated ones," possibly referring to their separation from ritual impurity. Snodgrass remarks (p. 86), "The Pharisees had a concern for purity at meals that we can hardly appreciate."

Pharisees invited Jesus to meals at other times (Lk. 11:37, 14:1) and warned Jesus about Herod wanting to kill him (Lk. 13:31), so one need not read anything sinister into the invitation. Indeed, whether in deference to others or from his own perspective, Simon called Jesus a teacher (v. 40), which was a title of respect and honor.

While Jesus was reclining at the table an uninvited guest approached him from behind. It was a woman who lived in that town, a woman Luke simply describes as "a sinner." Most likely she had been a prostitute but that is not certain. She approached Jesus with a flask of ointment or perfume, perhaps intending to anoint his head with it, but when she got next to him she just broke down weeping. As her tears rained down on Jesus' dirty feet, she let down her hair and mopped his feet with it. She then lavished kisses on his feet and poured her perfume on them.

Since the woman brought the ointment with her to the banquet, it seems clear that she came intending to anoint Jesus with it, which means he already had touched her life in some significant way. His preaching quite likely had been heard by Simon, the guests, and the woman.

For a woman to let down her hair in public was usually considered a shameful and seductive act, but sometimes it was done for purposes of religious devotion or gratitude

(Snodgrass [2008], 82). "Kissing someone's feet was the ultimate way to express honor, gratitude, and submission, but it was also an act of deep humility" (Snodgrass [2008], 82). Anointing someone's feet would be highly unusual and doing so with expensive ointment would be an extravagant act. Snodgrass says (2008, 86), "By letting her hair down, touching Jesus' feet even with her hair, and anointing his feet with perfume she contravened every social convention of the day. Were it not for her tears, the acts would border on the obscene."

When Simon saw the sinful woman wiping her tears from Jesus' feet with her hair, kissing his feet, and anointing them with expensive ointment, he was indignant. In his mind, Jesus' tolerance of this behavior proved that he was neither righteous nor a prophet. A prophet would know that the woman was a sinner and would not allow himself to be defiled by her touching him, let alone touching him in such an extravagant way.

The Pharisaic notion of sinners being defiling probably grew out of warnings in Scripture about associating with evildoers (e.g., Prov. 1:15, 2:11-15, 4:14-19). It is reflected in the Jewish writing Ecclesiasticus that dates to around 180 B.C. Verse 13:17 states: "What fellowship has a wolf with a lamb? No more has a sinner with a godly man." The rabbinic tractate *Mekilta Amalek*, a fourth-century compilation of material that may date back to the late first or early second century (Craig Evans, *Ancient Texts for New Testament Studies* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005], 232) states (3:55-57) "In this connection the sages said: Let a man never associate with a wicked person, not even for the purpose of bringing him near to the Torah" (Snodgrass [2008], 101).

Though Simon said these things to himself, meaning he was thinking them, Jesus answered what he was thinking by telling him a parable. So here is Simon concluding that Jesus cannot be a prophet and then Jesus responds to what he is thinking!

Lk. 7:40-50 states (ESV): *And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher." ⁴¹ "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" ⁴³ Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." ⁴⁴ Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷ Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven--for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." ⁴⁸ And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." ⁴⁹ Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" ⁵⁰ And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."*

The point of the parable, which Simon confesses, is that the degree of love expressed to a forgiver is expected to be proportional to the extent of the debt forgiven.

Jesus then applies that point to explain the woman's extravagant appreciation of him and Simon's lack of appreciation of him. Simon did not go out of his way to do anything special for Jesus in terms of hospitality. He was not hostile, he was indifferent to him; he showed absolutely no appreciation of who Jesus is. Simon did not give Jesus the common courtesy of supplying water for him to wash his feet and did none of the things above and beyond common courtesy that would honor a guest, such as greeting him with a kiss and anointing his head with oil.

The woman's deep appreciation of Jesus was due to her recognition of the magnitude of her guilt before God; she knew the size of her debt that had been forgiven. *Therefore*, she loved much. Joel Green states in *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 313:

When had she been forgiven? As in narratives more generally, so here we are confronted with a gap in the story line, and we must assume some prior encounter the effect of which was her forgiveness. This is hardly unusual for Luke, who occasionally introduces persons into the narrative who have already begun the journey of discipleship in some sense though we are never told when or how. What we are told is that she had already been forgiven.

In keeping with the parable, her extravagant love was a *result* of her having been forgiven not a *cause* of her being forgiven. As Darrell Bock states (1994, 703):

The parable explains why the woman acted, and her actions testify to the presence of forgiveness, which produced love. Because the woman was forgiven much, she loves much; her love is demonstrated by her actions, so that her great love reflects the presence of great forgiveness. The forgiveness is not a result of the acts; rather, the acts testify to love's presence in gratitude for the previous granting of forgiveness.

The phrase "*for* she loved much" in v. 47 means that her great love is evidence of her prior great forgiveness. Bock illustrates it this way (1994, 704): "the statement 'it is raining because the windows are wet' does not mean that the water on the windows is the cause of the rain. Rather, the water on the windows evidences the presence of rain." This sense is reflected in several standard translations: NRS (*hence* she has shown great love); NET (*thus* she loved much); TNIV & NIV 2011 (as her great love has shown); CSB (that's why she loved much).

The fact she expressed her appreciation to Jesus for the great forgiveness she had received shows that she understood something of Jesus' divinity (or at least his unique relationship with God). Jesus does nothing to discourage her in this regard and even confirms her understanding by telling Simon ("you" in v. 47 is singular) that her sins *have been* forgiven (perfect tense, rightly NAU, NRS, NIV, NAB, TNIV, NJB, CSB, NIV 2011). His saying "*I* tell you her sins . . . have been forgiven" seems to connect him

to the forgiveness in a more direct way than simply announcing that forgiveness had occurred, and that is how the guests took it (v. 49).

Jesus then says to the woman (v. 48), perhaps to reinforce or encourage her or to repeat it for the benefit of the other guests, that her sins are in a state of having been forgiven (perfect tense, rendered "have been forgiven" in NAS), which "suggests that the forgiveness began somewhere in the past" (Bock [1994], 705). He is, of course, fully aware of the woman's sinful past, which is why he refers to her "many sins" having been forgiven (v. 47). Jesus thus responds to another of Simon's thoughts – "if this man were a prophet, he would know . . ."

So Jesus justifies the woman and her conduct toward him and in the process makes a powerful statement about his identity and about the kingdom's openness to the worst of sinners. As he says in Lk. 5:32 (Mat. 9:13; Mk. 2:17), he did not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. The kingdom is not reserved for the religious elite. However shamefully one has lived, one may join with God in his work and share in all the blessings of the kingdom.

But Jesus also leaves Simon to wonder about his own forgiveness and relationship with God. Whether Simon recognizes it or not, his indifference toward Jesus is a reflection of his lack of forgiveness. Though the contrast from the parable is between the one who loves much in response to having been forgiven much and the one who loves little in response to having been forgiven little, the question it raises for Simon is whether the one who loves not at all has been forgiven at all. It is a warning and a challenge to Simon and to all who share his indifference toward the Lord.

B. The Lost Sheep (Lk. 15:1-7)

The parable of the lost sheep in Lk. 15:1-7 and Mat. 18:12-14 are variations of a parable that Jesus told at different times and for different purposes. I discuss Matthew's version in the section on living as kingdom participants in relation to others.

Luke 15:1-3 specify that the parable is in response to the Pharisees and scribes grumbling against Jesus for fraternizing with sinners. Luke 15:3-7 states (ESV): *So he told them this parable: ⁴ "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.*

Snodgrass comments (2008, 107):

The parable of the Lost Sheep is an analogical "how much more argument." . . . The logic of the parable is this: If, as surely you would agree, a shepherd will go after a lost sheep and rejoice when he finds it, how much more will God search for a lost/strayed person and rejoice when he recovers that person?

Jesus is defending his deliberately associating and eating with people known to be sinners. The God whose kingdom Jesus brings values people so highly that rather than ignore or isolate them when they are lost in sin he actively pursues them and rejoices when they repent and are thus recovered. His desire for them is not diminished by the fact he has others.

In fraternizing with the lost, Jesus is embodying the Father's love for them. Unlike his religious critics, he is living out the Old Testament portrayal of the Father as a shepherd who cares tenderly for his people. This imagery is perhaps presented most forcefully in Ezek. 34. In vv. 1-10 the prophet excoriates the leaders of Israel for failing to serve as proper shepherds, shepherds who seek out the lost and scattered sheep and feed them. He then says in vv. 11-16a (ESV): *"For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. ¹² As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered . . . ¹⁶ I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed . . .*

Some people assume that the shepherd abandoned the ninety-nine other sheep leaving them in peril and then pile a load of theological speculation on that foundation, but that is a mistake. The original hearers certainly would have assumed that the shepherd made some provision for the ninety-nine, whether leaving them in an enclosure or in the care of another shepherd. Snodgrass states (2008, 105):

Parables are marked by focus and brevity and do not care about unnecessary issues. Like all literature they often have gaps. This parable does not care about any of these questions [relating to the ninety-nine], for it is focused on the certainty of searching and the celebration at finding. Nothing else counts, and to make such issues matters of interpretation is catastrophic. Interpretation based on elements not there is almost certainly wrong.

God certainly values and is pleased with all who are in the fold, all who are in relationship with him, but there is something special about recovering what was lost. God seeks them; he is "the hound of heaven." As Jesus said in Lk. 19:10 (ESV), *"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."*

C. The Lost Coin (Lk. 15:8-10)

The parable of the lost coin occurs only in Lk. 15:8-10 and follows immediately after the parable of the lost sheep. Jesus says (ESV): *"Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it?"*⁹ *And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.'*¹⁰ *Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."*

The coin referred to here is a "drachma," a small Greek silver coin. This is the only place in the N.T. that a drachma is mentioned. A drachma was roughly equivalent in value to a denarius, which was a day's wages for a day laborer. It is not a great sum, but it is nothing to sneeze at, especially if one is relatively poor. The claim sometimes made that the ten coins were part of a necklace or headband that had been given to the woman at her wedding is almost certainly wrong (Hultgren, 66; Snodgrass [2008], 114).

Houses typically were small, and if they had any windows they would be small, so the lighting inside was quite poor. That would contribute to the difficulty finding such a small coin. The basic point of this parable is the same as the parable of the lost sheep, but there is a greater stress here on the diligence of the search. The woman sweeps the house, seeks the coin diligently (or carefully), and persists until she finds it.

The parable is another analogical "how much more argument." If a woman will expend herself until she finds a lost coin and rejoice when she finds it, will not God much more expend himself in pursuit of people lost in sin and rejoice when they repent and are thus recovered? (See Snodgrass, [2008], 114-115.) Again, his desire for them is not diminished by the fact he has others.

Jesus' associating and eating with sinners embodies the love and desire for the lost of the God whose kingdom he is bringing. It is the revolution or the transforming operation of God in which all mankind is sought to participate without regard to their past sinfulness. It is a kingdom from which only impenitence excludes.

D. The Lost Son (Lk. 15:11-32)

The parable of the lost son occurs only in Lk. 15:11-32 and follows immediately after the parable of the lost coin. This and the parable of the good Samaritan probably are the most loved and most influential of all of the Lord's parables. Snodgrass's proposed title may be more fitting: the parable of the compassionate father and his two lost sons.

It is important to remember that this is the last of three parables told in response to the Pharisees and scribes grumbling against Jesus for fraternizing with sinners (Lk. 15:1-2). I will comment on the parable in sections.

The parable opens with the son's departure. Luke 15:11-13 states (ESV): *And he said, "There was a man who had two sons."¹² And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property*

between them. ¹³ *Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living.*

In a normal circumstance, when the father died the older son would inherit 2/3 of his property and the younger son would inherit 1/3. The older son would have the primary responsibility of caring for the father (and mother) during his old age, but the younger son also would have some responsibility in that regard. This was their security for old age.

A father could transfer ownership of his estate to his sons during his lifetime, as an expression of his commitment to them as heirs, but it was considered unwise to do so and would be very unusual. If it was done, the expectation in Judaism would be that the sons honor their father by continuing to treat the property as his, by continuing to make it available for his use and support as he grew old. It would be theirs in title, but he would have what you might call a religious or cultural life estate, a continuing "right" to use and control of the property until his death that was based on religious or cultural duties rather than on law.

For a son to ask for his inheritance during the father's life would be brash to say the least. The younger son here not only asks for and receives his share during the father's lifetime, he "cashes out" and moves away so as to be unavailable to meet his responsibility to help care for his father. He takes part of the assets the father otherwise would have had at his disposal throughout his life and abandons his responsibility toward his father. Snodgrass remarks (2008, 131), "The boy may not have literally wished his father dead, but his actions show that he did not really care for his father or desire a relationship with him. He wanted the father's money, not the father."

Because the older son would not abandon his duty to honor his father but continued to treat his share of the inheritance as being at his father's disposal until the father's death, the father had the authority to reinstate the younger son as a consumer of what are now legally the older son's assets and to give orders about the banquet (vv. 22-23). The older son's portion of the inheritance was not really his to use because he was honor bound to maintain it for the father's use and support. That is why he complains about not having received anything.

Not only did the younger son "cash out," make his share of the inheritance unavailable to the father, he squandered the wealth in wasteful, reckless, or wild living. This may well have included immoral living, as indicated by the brother's remark (v. 30), but the Greek word (ἀσώτως) does not require that. He just threw it away so it was no longer available to help the father in his old age even if the younger son should be inclined to do so. It was gone.

The younger son's resulting hardship is told in Lk. 15:14-16 (ESV): *And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need.* ¹⁵ *So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him*

into his fields to feed pigs.¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

After he wasted his money in foolish self-indulgence, a famine arose and he had nothing to fall back on. He was reduced to hiring himself out as a servant to one of the citizens of that country, a Gentile, who sent him out to feed pigs. His desperation is marked by the fact he was feeding pigs. The Old Testament prohibited eating meat from a pig and touching a pig carcass (Lev. 11:7-8; Deut. 14:8), which in first-century Judaism had become a ban on rearing pigs. He had sunk so low that he longed to eat what the pigs were eating – he envied them – but was given nothing and thus was left worse off than pigs!

The son comes to his senses in Lk. 15:17-19, which states (ESV): *"But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger!¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'"*

Here he is stooping to being a hired servant of a Gentile and enduring the defiling task of feeding pigs, and yet he still is struggling to get enough food to sustain himself. It dawns on him that his father has hired servants who have more than enough to eat, so he would be better off returning to his father, confessing his sin, and working as one of his father's hired servants.

Some claim the son's repentance was not sincere but was a calculated maneuver designed simply to improve his situation. That seems unlikely, however, given that "I have sinned" is the way sincere confession is expressed in many Old Testament passages (e.g., 2 Sam. 12:13, 24:10, 24:17; Ps. 41:4, 51:4; Mic. 7:9).

The son's sin against heaven and his father was his failure to honor his father as required by Ex. 20:12 and Deut. 5:16. He dishonored his father, if not by seeking his inheritance prematurely then certainly by turning his back on his responsibility to help care for him and by squandering the means to do so in self-indulgent living and possibly in more overt sinful living. Hultgren states (p. 77):

It is not said what the young man's "sin" might be. While the modern interpreter imagines easily that it had to do with his way of life in the far country, the ancient storyteller and hearer might think otherwise. For them the sin of the younger son would more likely be his insolence in leaving home with his share of the property and therefore not providing for his father in old age, as the commandment requires. Such a view becomes even more probable in light of the elder brother's statement in 15:30, in which he speaks of the younger brother's devouring "*your* property" – precisely that which was to be used to maintain the father beyond his working years when he turns the farm over to his sons.

The son's return is told in Lk. 15:20-24 (ESV): *And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹ And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'* ²² *But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.'* *And they began to celebrate.*

The son returns, and the father sees him when he is still a long way off, perhaps implying that he was hoping for him to return. Rather than anger or resentment over how he was treated, emotions on the part of the father that any hearer would understand, the father feels compassion toward his son. He runs for the son, which was considered improper and undignified for an older man to do because he would have to lift his robe and expose his legs, and he embraces and kisses him. The father is filled with joy at the sinful son's return, assuming in the hope spawned by love what the hearer of the parable knows to be true, that the son has come seeking reconciliation.

The son begins his spiel, but when he says that he is no longer worthy to be called the father's son, the father interrupts and orders various honor-bestowing acts to be done for the son to leave no doubt that he is an honored member of the family. That is what the robe, ring, and sandals are about. They are emblems of the fullness of his reception. The father orders a celebration meal in honor of the joyful occasion of his lost son's return. The father's heart is bursting with an uncontainable joy.

The story then turns to the older brother. Luke 15:25-32 states (ESV): *"Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷ And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.'* ²⁸ *But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, ²⁹ but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!'* ³¹ *And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"*

The father's desire for his younger son, despite his having been lost and dead in sin, and his great joy at his return parallels those points from the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. The son did not cease to be valuable to his father when he was away and estranged. He remained precious as evident by the joy.

The older son is angry over his father's reception of the younger son and resents his celebrating his return. Why should his return be celebrated when he should not have done what he did in the first place? If anyone is to be celebrated over it should be the one

who did not mistreat and dishonor the father. Take him back if you must, but certainly don't celebrate his return as though his rebellion is forgotten. Let him come home but remind him of his shame and wrongdoing by remaining distant and aloof, by giving him only a diminished father-son relationship. Do not accept him as though he never sinned!

The father tells him that his joyful reception of the younger son in no way takes away from his position – it is not a zero-sum game – but celebration was called for because the return of something as precious as a son who had been lost (or dead) is an inherently joyful thing. It would be wrong not to celebrate and be glad on such an occasion because a father never stops loving a child, even when he's breaking his heart.

You see, the older brother's attitude is precisely the attitude of the Pharisees and scribes toward those they saw as sinners, those who lived unholy and shameful lives. They objected to Jesus fraternizing with such people because they did not share the Father's love for them. In their mind, the sinners' blatant mistreatment and dishonoring of God made them unworthy of actively pursuing let alone rejoicing over should they return.

The parable makes clear that it is Jesus who is working for the joy of the Father and that in grumbling against his outreach to sinners the Pharisees and scribes stand like the older brother in opposition to the Father. It is an appeal to them to share in God's joy over the recovery of lost sinners and thus to change their attitude toward them. In terms of the parable, it is an invitation for them to go in and join the celebration over the younger brother's return.

Understand that Jesus' willingness or desire to mingle with sinners was never to approve of or endorse their sin. He never affirmed them in their sin, made them think they were not doing wrong or that disobeying God was unimportant. Rather, he mixed with them to draw them to the Father in repentance from their sin. As it says in 15:1, the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near *to hear him!* He was offering them life by calling them to God not being corrupted by them.

The fact the father tells the older son in v. 31, "you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours," is not an indication that the Pharisees and scribes are right with God. On the contrary, the main point of the parable is to show how out of step they are with God, to show that their attitude toward penitent sinners is the opposite of God's. His is celebration; theirs is disdain and resentment. The statement in v. 31 simply highlights the unreasonableness of their resisting the joyful reception of penitent sinners by showing that it does not come at the expense of whatever blessings the father may have in store for them. As I said, it is not a zero-sum game. The question left open by the parable is whether the Pharisees and scribes, like the younger son, will "return" to the father and receive those blessings, whether they will cease dishonoring the father and obey his desire that penitent sinners be received gladly.

Those of us who have been saved for a long time, who have for decades sought to do what God wants done, can fall into the trap into which these Pharisees and scribes had fallen. We can forget how much God still loves and longs for those who have turned

against him, who have chosen to disrespect and dishonor him. We can let our passion and devotion for God get twisted into an ungodly resentment of those who have mistreated him so that we cease to share his love and longing for them. We can find ourselves not sharing God's zeal for them and not rejoicing with him when they return.

E. Pharisee and tax collector (Lk. 18:9-14)

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector occurs only at Lk. 18:10-14. Luke 18:9 specifies that the parable was told "to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt." So the target was the religiously smug, those who saw themselves as worthy before God because they obeyed so well and who treated with contempt those they perceived as not sufficiently devout.

Jesus says in Lk. 18:10-14 (ESV): *"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."*

Pharisees took their religion very seriously. They were devoted to observing the law and were very concerned about ritual purity. "According to Josephus, the Pharisees were the most observant of all the identifiable Jewish groups, and they were held in high regard among the masses of the people" (Hultgren, 121). They were seen as the epitome of piety.

Tax collectors, on the other hand, were seen by the people as being on the other end of the spectrum. The main taxes Rome required the Jews in Judea and Galilee to pay were a tax on the produce of the land, a per-person tax, and taxes on goods being transported. The first two, known as direct taxes, were collected by councils of Jewish leaders and their representatives on an annual basis. The last kind, known as indirect taxes, was collected by the person who had bid for the right to collect them within a given district. See, Thomase E. Schmidt, "Taxation, Jewish" in Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 1164-1165.

The people to whom tax collection had been farmed out by the Romans (or their underlings) are the "tax collectors" of the N.T. They were Jews, and they made their living by collecting more than they had paid in advance to Rome. So there was a built-in incentive for fraud because the collector kept what he collected. There was room for dishonesty because the assessor had the power to determine the value of certain goods. It should not be surprising that tax collectors were notorious for their dishonesty.

In addition, collectors of both direct and indirect taxes were despised for their collusion with Rome. They were viewed as collaborating with the despised occupying power. The attitudes toward tax collectors, and especially toward those collecting indirect taxes, were very negative. In the Mishnah, which is an early third-century codification of earlier oral tradition, they are classified with murderers and robbers (Snodgrass [2008], 467).

"So Jesus in his parable compares a representative of the most religious people in society with a representative of the most irreligious" (Wenham, 119). They are polar opposites on the public's righteousness scale, something like a preacher or missionary on one hand and a corrupt and extorting politician on the other. That is the punch of the parable.

Both the Pharisee and the tax collector went up to the temple to pray, the customary hours for which would be 9:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m., the times of the morning and afternoon sacrifices. The ESV and others may be correct in translating v. 11a "The Pharisee, standing *by himself*, prayed," but with Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X–XXIV*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 1182; John Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 873, 876; Hultgren (p. 118-119, 122); NIV; and NET, I think more can be said for the translation "The Pharisee stood and prayed *about himself*." He opens with a nod toward God but then the content of his prayer is about his superior piety in relation to others. It is self-congratulatory and evinces disdain for those he judges morally defective.

The tax collector's sense of his sin is reflected in his standing far off. He feels unworthy to be among others who have gathered at the temple for prayer. He would not even lift his eyes to heaven, which was a common posture for prayer, because of his sense of guilt. His beating of his breast was a sign of anguish or contrition (Lk. 23:48). His prayer is simply, "God, be merciful to me, *the sinner!*" He is not just "a sinner"; he feels he is a *distinctive* sinner.

Jesus delivers the shocking verdict in v. 14: the tax collector went home justified before God whereas the Pharisee did not. The reason is that "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." In other words, the way to justification is only by God's mercy, and that mercy can be received only by one who recognizes his need for it. Those who seek to lay claim to God on the basis of their good works are left to stand on them, which leaves them unjustified, as is evident here in the fact the Pharisee's disdain for people like the tax collector violates God's command to love one's neighbor (e.g., Lk. 10:27-28).

V. The Kingdom Is Bad News for the Establishment

A. The two sons (Mat. 21:28-32)

The parable of the two sons occurs only at Mat. 21:28-32. There is a question about the original text of this parable, but all I will say on that is that there are good reasons for accepting as original the text that is reflected in the vast majority of modern English versions.

Jesus tells this parable in the context of an exchange in the temple between him and the chief priests and elders of the people. They ask him in Mat. 21:23, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus tells them that he will answer their question if they first answer his, and then he asks them whether John's baptism was from heaven or from man. This is more related to their question to him than one might think. As John Nolland states in *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 863, "the leaders have questions about Jesus' authority precisely because they have never actually faced up to the challenge of John's message."

They refuse to answer because they see they will be in trouble however they respond. If they say from heaven, they will have no answer to the inevitable follow-up question, why didn't you believe him? If they say from men, they will face the wrath of the people who accepted that John was a prophet. Jesus then likewise refuses to answer their question to him.

Verse 25 shows that the chief priests and elders knew full well that if John's baptism was from heaven, meaning that he was acting as God's agent under God's authority, then they should have believed him. To refuse the message of God's prophet is to refuse to obey God. It is clear, however, from vv. 25 and 32 that they did *not* believe him. Presumably they were among those who claimed John was possessed by a demon (Mat. 11:18).

Though they refused in this instance to admit their denial that John's baptism was from heaven, Jesus tells them a parable that casts that denial in the negative light in which it belongs. He says in vv. 28-32 (ESV): "*What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.'* ²⁹ *And he answered, 'I will not,' but afterward he changed his mind and went.* ³⁰ *And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go.* ³¹ *Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you.* ³² *For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him."*

The question after the story of the two sons gets the chief priests and elders to pass judgment on themselves by acknowledging that the one who obeys the father is the one who actually *does* what the father wants rather than the one who merely *says* he will do what the father wants. Jesus then applies that admission to the religious leaders by contrasting their refusal to believe John, which is a refusal to do what God wants, with the willingness of the tax collectors and prostitutes to believe him. Those the leaders held

in contempt as vile sinners, those who initially said "No" to God, turned out through their acceptance of John's message to be the ones who did God's will whereas the leaders, despite professing their devotion to God's will, refused to do it by refusing to accept John's preaching. The fruit of repentance in the lives of sinners who had accepted John's message should have impressed the leaders and given them additional impetus for taking his ministry seriously, but still they refused to believe him.

John came as God's herald and forerunner of the "kingdom bringer," the Lord Jesus Christ. His message was that they needed to repent for the kingdom was at hand in the impending ministry of the one who was mightier than John, the one whose sandals he was unworthy to carry (Mat. 3:1-12). In Wenham's words (p. 124):

The distinction between John and Jesus is the difference between the police outrider in a procession and the royal or other dignitary following in his or her official car or carriage. In other words, John was a prophet looking forward, the last in the line in fact; Jesus was the one looked forward to, the fulfillment of the prophetic hopes.

But – and this is the point implied in the parable of the two sons – John and Jesus were part of the same cavalcade, the same revolutionary movement.

In accepting the message of John the Baptist, sinners were making themselves kingdom ready in that they turned from their sin and looked for the one to whom John pointed. As a result, they were entering the kingdom of God in their embrace of the Christ who was ushering in the kingdom, an embrace flowing from John's preparatory ministry. The priests and elders, on the other hand, were not entering the kingdom because they refused to embrace Christ in keeping with their refusal to believe John's message (see Lk. 7:29-30).

B. The wicked tenants (Mat. 21:33-46; Mk. 12:1-12; Lk. 20:9-19)

The parable of the wicked tenants occurs at Mat. 21:33-46, Mk. 12:1-12, and Lk. 20:9-19. The context and setting of the parable are the same in each Gospel. The wording of the parable is a bit different, but the story is essentially the same. The difference in wording is because the authors of the Gospels are not giving the very words of Jesus ("*ipsissima verba*"). He almost certainly taught regularly in Aramaic, and they are writing in Greek. Rather, they are by divine inspiration faithfully representing in Greek the meaning of what Jesus said, which meaning can be expressed accurately in different wording (witness how English versions of the Bible vary in wording while conveying the same meaning). They do not purport to be quoting him; Hebrew and Greek had no equivalent of quotation marks. In addition, the authors by inspiration shape their report of what Jesus (and others) said for the purpose of their Gospel, sometimes omitting, combining, or summarizing things, without ever misrepresenting him.

Matthew 21:33-46 states (ESV): *"Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. ³⁴ When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. ³⁵ And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. ³⁶ Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. ³⁷ Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' ³⁸ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.' ³⁹ And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. ⁴⁰ When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" ⁴¹ They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons." ⁴² Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'? ⁴³ Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. ⁴⁴ And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him." ⁴⁵ When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. ⁴⁶ And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet.*

The vineyard was an Old Testament image for Israel, and the fact the language in the parable parallels Isa. 5:1-5 supports the conclusion it is being used that way here. Those tending the vineyard, Israel's leaders, had failed to produce from Israel the fruit of righteousness that God was due. God had repeatedly sent prophets to urge the people to be faithful to the covenant, to give him his due, but the leaders shamefully treated them.

Jesus was sent to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mat. 15:21-24; see also, Mat. 10:5-6). He was the son coming after many prophets calling Israel again to repent but this time in light of the kingdom's arrival (Mk. 1:15, 6:12; Mat. 4:17, 11:20; Lk. 13:2-5). He came bringing the blessings of the kingdom the receipt of which requires faith in him as the Messiah, which includes a genuine commitment to holy living. Rather than accept Jesus as the master's son, as one who came in the fullness of the master's authority, the religious leaders are challenging his authority (21:23) and ultimately will kill him as the tenants in the parable kill the master's son. After telling that the tenants kill the master's son, Jesus asks in v. 40, "When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" The religious leaders answer, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons," and in doing so again pass judgment on themselves.

Jesus brings the point home by citing Ps. 118:22-23, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?" The rejected one, Jesus, becomes the preeminent one by the will of God. Wenham remarks (p. 128-129):

The saying about the stone supplements the parable and in a sense completes it, since the one rejected and killed, as the parable describes,

was in due course to be the risen Lord and the cornerstone in the saved people of God. We have commented before on the limitations of parables, and Jesus' parable of the vineyard is limited precisely in the fact that it leaves the son dead. To have had the son of the story rise from the dead would have altered the character of the parable as a picture taken from everyday life. . . . So, in using the stone saying, Jesus, who regularly spoke of his death and resurrection together, supplements the parable of the vineyard with another parable of resurrection, as we may regard it.

He adds that their rejection of him will mean that the kingdom of God, for which Israel was first in line – so much so that they are called "sons of the kingdom" in Mat. 8:12 – will be denied to them (their expectation taken away) and given to another nation, meaning the holy nation that is the church (1 Pet. 2:9), the faithful subset of Israel (the true Israel of faith) that with the grafting in of Gentiles becomes the new, spiritual Israel (Rom. 4:9-16, 11:11-24; Gal. 3:7, 6:16; Eph. 2:11-22). Wenham states (p. 129):

The parable is thus an indictment of the political and religious leadership of 'the vineyard', but also a warning that the people whom they represent will come under divine judgment. The parable could be read as a warning to only the current leaders of the Jews that they would be displaced, rather than as a warning of judgment on the nation of Israel as a whole. But it is clear from Jesus' teaching elsewhere that Jerusalem and the Jewish nation as a whole face judgment, and that, although the opposition to Jesus in the nation is not universal (see the disciples!), the whole nation is implicated in the actions of its leaders (e.g., Mt. 23-24).

So ethnic Israel *as led and represented by* Christ-rejecters, which describes the nation proper at that time, forfeits the kingdom blessings it was to enjoy, but ethnic Israel as led and represented by the apostles of Christ receives the blessing of the kingdom along with the later Gentiles of like faith. It is this holy nation that will receive the glory of being God's vehicle for blessing the world (Mat. 28:19-20). The parable resonates with Jesus' lament in Mat. 23:37-38 (ESV): "*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!*"³⁸ *See, your house is left to you desolate.*"

The statement in v. 44 – "And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him" – seems to be a proverbial statement, perhaps rooted in Isa. 8:14-15 and Dan. 2:44-45, that here expresses the danger of being at odds with the "Messiah stone" of v. 42. Hagner writes (1995, 623), "Here it is the rejected stone – now the cornerstone (Ps 118:22 in v. 42) – who becomes to those who have rejected him either the stone of stumbling or the stone that crushes, in both cases bringing ruin to them."

The chief priests and Pharisees understood that Jesus was speaking about them, but despite his warning that they will be crushed by God's cornerstone if they reject it,

verse 46 reports their intent to arrest him! It was their fear of the crowds, who believed Jesus was a prophet, that restrained them.

C. The wedding banquet and the feast (Mat. 22:1-14; Lk. 14:16-24)

The parable of the wedding banquet in Mat. 22:1-14 and the parable of the feast in Lk. 14:16-24 are variations of a parable that Jesus told at different times. Some scholars reject that suggestion, claiming that the differences are the result of later alterations of a single original parable, but as Snodgrass (2008, 310) points out:

I find it hard to accept that one account stands behind the two quite different accounts in Matthew and Luke. . . . Why is this parable so different if both accounts are from the same source? . . . Is it not likely that Jesus spoke a given parable on a number of occasions and in different contexts, adapting it each time, perhaps, to the circumstances? A parable like that of the Banquet, especially if it was a challenge to Jesus' contemporaries, may have been told numerous times in various places and forms.

The parable of the wedding banquet in Mat. 22:1-14 is the last in a set of three parables that speak of the Jewish leadership's rejection of God's kingdom call. Snodgrass says (2008, 299), "Matthew's version is enough to make any interpreter go weak in the knees; I consider it among the most difficult parables of all."

Matthew 22:1-14 states (ESV): *And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying,* ² *"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son,* ³ *and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come.* ⁴ *Again he sent other servants, saying, 'Tell those who are invited, See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.'* ⁵ *But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business,* ⁶ *while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them.* ⁷ *The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.* ⁸ *Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy.'* ⁹ *Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.'* ¹⁰ *And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests.* ¹¹ *"But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment.* ¹² *And he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless.* ¹³ *Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'* ¹⁴ *For many are called, but few are chosen."*

In the ancient Near East, there was a double-invitation process for large feasts. There was an invitation to which one needed to respond so the host would know for how many people he needed to prepare. The acceptances determined which animals should be

butchered. Because the time to prepare was difficult to determine in advance, it was standard procedure to send a second invitation at the approximate hour, which really was an announcement that the feast now was ready. In the parable, the servants are informing those who already had accepted the king's invitation that it was time to come. See, e.g., Snodgrass (2008, 307); France (2007, 823-824); Keener (1999, 519).

To reject a king's invitation to a feast would be a slap in the face, an insult to his dignity, let alone a reneging on one's prior acceptance. Attending was a social obligation that simply could not be refused. The fact the invited guests ignored the call to come to the feast would leave the original hearers of the parable cringing. The fact all of them ignored the call suggests clearly that it was their intent to insult the king. (You can get some sense of the seriousness of dishonoring someone from David's reaction to Nabal's snubbing of his request in 1 Sam. 25:1-13.)

In the parable, the king goes the extra mile by sending a second group of servants to call those invited, who explain the preparations that have been made presumably to entice the invited guests to come. The fact they not only ignore this second group but that some actually mistreat and kill them leaves no doubt that this is enemy action. This is an act of rebellion amounting to a declaration of war against the king, which explains his destroying them and burning their city. As Keener notes (1999, 521), "The parable's audience would naturally applaud the king's rage . . . as just."

The upshot of these events, and the first point of the parable, is that those *not* expected to be at the feast, those initially not invited, end up receiving the king's bounty whereas those expected to be at the feast, those initially invited, end up receiving the king's wrath. This is the same kind of reversal in the parable of the two sons where tax collectors and prostitutes enter the kingdom ahead of (in place of) the religious elite and in the parable of the wicked tenants where the kingdom is forfeited by its presumptive recipients and given to others.

The fact the unexpected are not invited until the expected refuse their invitation is not teaching a chronology of God's kingdom calling. That simply is a way of creating a reversal of expectations within the framework of the parable. Given that all persons invited to a royal feast would be expected to attend, the initial lack of an invitation to some is necessary to have a group that is not expected to attend so it can serve as an analogy to the sinners the Jewish leaders did not expect to be in the kingdom. Without such a group in the parable, there can be no reversal of expectations. As Snodgrass states (2008, 315) regarding the version of the parable in Luke:

[T]o worry over the fact that the parable depicts the host as inviting the wealthy and only later turning to the poor, as if God and Jesus became interested in the poor and outcasts only after other people rejected, is allegorizing and assumes that every feature of the analogy must mirror reality. Such thinking also assumes that narrative time corresponds to real time, which is not true. Parable chronology is not real-time chronology. A parable is a *partial* picture of reality, and it holds up part of reality to make

a specific point or points, sometimes in an extreme fashion. Parables must be allowed to mirror the portion of reality they wish and not forced to picture a systematic theology or a chronology *in toto*."

Nolland says (1993, 759) of Luke's account, "The reaching out to the poor and disabled corresponds to the ministry of Jesus himself, but of course in reality it needs no basis in some change of plan on the part of God. That is only part of the need to provide story-line motivation."

Since the burning of cities in war was a common occurrence, the destroying of the feast-rejecters and the burning of their city is a fitting picture of the king's wrath. It symbolizes God's exclusion and punishment of the religiously privileged Jews who not only were unreceptive to his summons but who, in keeping with their history of killing those sent to them (Mat. 23:37), had killed John and would soon mistreat and kill Christ's disciples.

The breadth of the kingdom call is expressed in the gathering into the feast of all whom the king's servants could find, both bad and good. No one is to be excluded from the invitation because of how they had lived or for any other reason; God wants a large crowd at the feast!

Though all manner of people are summoned, accepting the invitation carries a commitment to be properly respectful to the king. That is the second point of the parable. One cannot accept the invitation with a spirit of defiance, with an intention to give God less than his due. That is what is behind the man who is condemned for not wearing a wedding garment. He wanted to accept the invitation on his own terms, to accept it without caring about God's honor.

Whether the host at such a feast provided a wedding garment, which most think is unlikely, or whether a wedding garment meant only one's best clean available attire, it is clear that this man made no effort to wear something fitting for the feast and thus showed contempt for the king and his banquet. His guilt is evident in his silence when the king gives him a chance to explain his gross breach of etiquette. France states (2005, 826-827):

The clothing expected at a wedding was not a special garment (like our "morning dress") but decent, clean white clothes such as anyone should have had available. In that case the man's fault is that, even though invited to a royal wedding, he had not gone home to change into his best; to turn up in ordinary, dirty clothes was an insult to the host. The symbolism is of someone who presumes on the free offer of salvation by assuming that therefore there are no obligations attached, someone whose life belies their profession: faith without works. Entry to the kingdom of heaven may be free, but to continue in it carries conditions. Even though this man belongs to the new group of invitees, he is one who produces no fruit, and so is no

less liable to forfeit his new-found privilege than those who were excluded before him.

Verse 14 sums up the parable. Many are invited but fewer than that are chosen to receive the blessings because fewer than that will respond to the invitation in genuine faith.

The version of the parable in Lk. 14:16-24 is told in reply to the statement made to Jesus in 14:15: "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God." Bock remarks (2002, 278): "In all likelihood, [the person making the statement] was saying that it will be great when blessing one day comes to all those present. The image is the fellowship at the banquet table of God in the end (see Isa. 25:6; Ps. 22:26). Jesus responds with yet another parable about a banquet. He challenges the optimistic assumption of the remark."

The parable in Luke differs in a number of ways from the parable in Matthew, but the storyline of the two is basically the same. A man of wealth and status goes to trouble and expense to prepare a great feast after people he invited said they would come. When he summons the invitees to come after the feast is prepared, they all snub him. The host, in the face of this insult, sends out servants to gather all kinds of people into the feast.

In Luke's version, the man is not a king and he is hosting a great banquet rather than a wedding feast. No mention is made of a son. The guests are summoned only one time after the feast is ready, the servant doing the summoning is not mistreated, and the excuses given by the invitees for renegeing on their prior acceptance are given in some detail. There are two waves of substitute guests, the first of which are identified as the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame, and there is no parallel to the man improperly attired.

The parable in Luke makes the point, also made in Matthew's version, that those not expected to be at the feast, those initially not invited, end up there whereas those expected to be at the feast, those initially invited, end up being excluded. The Jewish leaders, who seemed to be "sitting pretty" religiously, are not going to be in the kingdom because they are rejecting God's summons whereas those they consider outcasts of both society and God are going to be in the kingdom because they are accepting that summons.

The poor, crippled, blind, and lame are an especially fitting representation of those not expected to enter the kingdom feast because, in addition to being social outcasts, those with physical defects were considered by some Jews, such as the Essenes at Qumran, to be disqualified from the kingdom. Referring to the Qumran documents, Craig Evans states in *Luke*, New International Bible Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 225 (bold type in original):

Jesus' parable suggests that the very persons thought to be disqualified (basically according to the stipulations of Lev. 21:17-23) from the final

holy battle of the last days and from the messianic feast that follows would end up being the very people who will participate in this celebration, while ironically and tragically **none of those people who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.**

The second gathering effort of previously uninvited guests emphasizes the room available at the feast and the depth of God's desire for a full house. That they must be "compelled" (in the sense of socially urged) to attend reinforces the unexpectedness of their presence at the feast. They are reluctant because they see the honor as too great for one of their status and something for which they could never reciprocate; they require convincing that they really are wanted at the banquet in the city.

VI. The Call to a Kingdom Decision

A. The narrow gate and way (Mat. 7:13-14)

Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount exhorts the disciples to live radically righteous lives, to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. In Mat. 7:7-11 he speaks of the source and means for doing so, the power of God that is available through prayer, and then in 7:12 he renews his exhortation to kingdom living, this time in terms of the "Golden Rule," the principle that captures the essence of the Old Testament's ethical direction (see, Rom. 13:8-10).

As I have said elsewhere, the fundamental ethical requirement for the Christian is love (Mat. 7:12, 22:37-40; Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14), but love is not some shapeless sentiment that is detached from conduct. Some specific conduct is loving and other conduct is not. Love is the center, but there are definite requirements on how it expresses itself. As Paul indicates in Rom. 13:9, the command to love your neighbor as yourself encompasses the commands of the law not to commit adultery, not to murder, not to steal, and not to covet (and other commands he does not specify). Thus, the Christian, though not being under the Mosaic law, the *set of commands* that are part of Mosaic covenant, upholds the transcendent moral requirements that are included in that law (e.g., Rom. 13:8-10; 1 Cor. 10:14; Eph. 6:2). This ongoing moral law, centered in love, is the "law of Christ" (see 1 Cor. 9:21 and Gal. 6:2 with 5:14).

Right after summarizing their ethical duty in terms of the Golden Rule, Jesus in Mat. 7:13-14 challenged his hearers with these words (ESV): *"Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. ¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."*

The "narrow gate" is Jesus Christ. As he says in Jn. 10:9, "I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture." He is a "narrow gate" not only because the allegiance given to him cannot be shared but also

because the life that follows from faith in him, a life of discipleship, is restrictive compared to the broad way of life of those who do not call him Master. John Stott explains the two roads associated with the two gates this way (*The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, 194):

One way is easy. . . . There is plenty of room on it for diversity of opinions and laxity of morals. It is the road of tolerance and permissiveness. It has no curbs, no boundaries of either thought or conduct. Travelers on this road follow their own inclinations, that is, the desires of the human heart in its fallenness. Superficiality, self-love, hypocrisy, mechanical religion, false ambition, censoriousness – these things do not have to be learnt or cultivated. Effort is needed to resist them. No effort is required to practice them. That is why the broad road is easy.

The path of discipleship is hard in that it requires restraint, discipline, and self-denial, but paradoxically those who embrace that way, who make that surrender, find that the Lord's yoke is easy and his burden is light (Mat. 11:30). The destination of discipleship is life, meaning eternal fellowship with God in the consummated kingdom, whereas the destination of the broad gate and the easy road, the way taken by the many who are spiritually complacent, is ruin, meaning separation from God, which is hell. David Turner states (p. 216):

The wide path that promised freedom has ended in separation from God. But when one takes the difficult step of entering the narrow gate, although the path of discipleship is very arduous, suddenly one is ushered into eternal life. The rugged path that threatened to destroy has ended in one's sharing in the life of God and his kingdom. Those who take the easy road find to their horror that it leads to the most difficult destination imaginable. But those who take the difficult path of the kingdom arrive joyously in the kingdom to experience life with the Father.

The challenge of Christ's call remains today. Join the revolution; fall in behind the kingdom bringer, the Lord Jesus Christ, trusting in him for life and giving him your wholehearted allegiance. Choose to follow him with devotion and seriousness, braced for the difficulty discipleship brings in this overlap of ages and knowing the glory that awaits you.

B. The narrow door (Lk. 13:23-28)

In Lk. 13:23 Jesus is asked by someone, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" Jesus says in Lk. 13:24-28 (ESV): "*Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.* ²⁵ *When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then he will answer you, 'I do not know where you come from.'* ²⁶ *Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.'*

²⁷ *But he will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!'* ²⁸ *In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out."*

The way of salvation, the way into the kingdom feast, is described as a narrow door through which Jesus calls his hearers (command is plural) to *strive* to enter. "Strive" is an athletic metaphor "employed in Hellenism and Hellenistic Judaism with respect to the practice of virtue and obedience to the law of God" (Green [1997], 530). The way into the feast involves a faith that includes surrender to the will of God, a genuine repentance.

One must strive to enter while the opportunity to do so exists. There is an urgency because the door is going to be closed at some point, whether by death or the Lord's return, at which time entry will no longer be possible. Those who refused to commit to Christ when they had the chance will be locked out and appeals to casual involvement with him will change nothing. The owner will say, "Depart from me, all you workers of evil!" which shows their exclusion is a function of their refusal to take seriously the demands of discipleship. They will be excluded from the kingdom feast, consigned to a place where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Wenham states (p. 197):

The point is simple: failure to live out the way of God's revolution – with its higher righteousness and law of love – is fatal. We may compare Paul's warnings about baptism without obedience being a recipe for disaster – the earliest baptismal creed was probably 'Jesus is Lord' – and about spiritual gifts without revolutionary love being useless (1 Cor 10:1-11; 13:2). Joining the revolution is not just a matter of words of allegiance, but of following Jesus in serious, costly commitment.

C. The two houses (Mat. 7:24-27; Lk. 6:47-49)

Many are convinced that Matthew's Sermon on the Mount and Luke's Sermon on the Plain are two different accounts of the same occasion. I lean toward the view that Matthew's and Luke's accounts are of sermons delivered by Jesus on two separate occasions. Accordingly, I take the parable of the two houses in Mat. 7:24-27 and Lk. 6:47-49 as variations of a parable that Jesus told at the end of these sermons. I will only discuss the version in Matthew, as the differences are minor and the parable functions in essentially the same way in both Gospels.

Matthew 7:24-27 states (ESV): *"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand.*

²⁷ *And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."*

Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount with this parable illustrating the wise man's choice. It serves "to underscore the significance of Jesus' teaching in the sermon and to urge obedience to his teaching . . ." (Snodgrass [2008], 330). Those who become true disciples, who have a genuine faith in Jesus that expresses itself in obedience to his words, are like a wise man who built his house on a rock. Just as the house built on a rock can withstand the devastation of a physical storm, disciples will withstand the great storm of the final judgment.

Those who never come to a saving faith in Jesus, an obedience-producing faith, but continue to live without putting his words into practice, are like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. Just as the house built on sand will not withstand the devastation of a physical storm, those who are not true disciples will not withstand the great storm of the final judgment (e.g., Mat. 13:47-50). Wenham (p. 202-203) summarizes the parable's meaning this way:

The parable of the two houses explains that the deciding factor on that day will quite simply be people's response to Jesus' word. The contrast is between those who 'hear these words of mine and do them' and those who hear and do not do them. This is a natural enough emphasis at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, but it is, of course, the emphasis throughout Jesus' teaching. He has brought 'the word of the kingdom,' and for all its apparent weakness and insignificance (emphasized in the parables of growth) it is in fact the key to entry into the kingdom, the solid rock on which to build. As John's gospel puts it, Jesus has 'the words of life' and judgment depends on response to him and his words (Jn 6:68; 5:24, *etc.*).

Snodgrass (2008, 336) raises the question of whether the teaching of this parable fits with Christian salvation theology. He responds (p. 336-337):

It might be better to ask if today's salvation teaching fits with the teaching of Jesus. As Miroslav Volf complained, "*We may believe in Jesus, but we do not believe in his ideas. . . .*" It is not the parable that is wrong but our understanding of the gospel. Christian salvation teaching often emphasizes faith apart from works, which is translated as belief in certain doctrines without any action. This is a distortion of Paul's theology, does not fit with NT teaching at all (which everywhere stresses behavior), and produces an abysmal result and an awful witness. Jesus stresses doing (as do Paul and every other NT writer), especially in the Sermon. . . .

The parable insists that we change our salvation theology so that it conforms to Jesus' teaching and focuses rightly on a relation with Jesus that produces action.

D. The sower (Mat. 13:1-9, 18-23; Mk. 4:1-9, 13-20; Lk. 8:4-8, 11-15)

The parable of the sower occurs in Matthew, Mark, and Luke with relatively minor differences in wording. It is one of only three parables given a detailed, itemized explanation, the other two being the parable of the wheat and the weeds (Mat. 13:24-30, 36-43) and the parable of the net (Mat. 13:47-50). There are relatively minor differences in wording, but as Snodgrass states (2008, 172), "The differences of the three accounts in the wording of the parable, its interpretation, and the intervening material about the purpose of parables are rather insignificant."

Jesus says in Mk. 4:3-9 (ESV): *"Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. ⁵ Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. ⁶ And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. ⁸ And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." ⁹ And he said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."*

In Mk. 4:14-20 he gives this explanation of the parable to his disciples (ESV): *The sower sows the word. ¹⁵ And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. ¹⁶ And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. ¹⁷ And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. ¹⁸ And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, ¹⁹ but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. ²⁰ But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold."*

The focus of the parable is the receptivity and conditions of the soils that receive the word, so much so that some refer to it as the parable of the soils. It serves as a warning to those hearing the good news of the kingdom not to be like those portrayed by the first three soils. Simply being exposed to the word is not enough. One must receive it as good soil, meaning one must respond to it in repentance and with perseverance. Blomberg (1990, 228) summarizes the meaning this way:

The three main points of the parable thus fall into place. (1) Like the sower, God spreads his word widely among all kinds of people. (2) Like the three kinds of unfruitful soil, many will respond to his word with less than saving faith, be it (a) complete lack of positive response due to the enticement of evil, (b) temporary superficiality masquerading as true commitment, or (c) genuine interest and conviction about the truth that simply falls short due to the rigorous demands of discipleship. (3) Like the

fruitful soil, the only legitimate response to God's word is the obedience and perseverance which demonstrate true regeneration.

Snodgrass states (2008, 170):

The parable is a description of various responses to hearing God's word and surely depicts the responses Jesus encountered in his own ministry. . . . The parable warns against superficial hearing, but it also anticipates real and productive hearing. Real hearing is hearing that leads to obedience, and we should not forget that the Hebrew verb for hearing (*šama'*) is often translated in English as "obey."

C. F. D. Moule states in his commentary on Mark (quoted in Walter W. Wessel, "Mark" in Frank E. Gaebelin, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984] 8:651):

Words may be sound and lively enough, but it is up to each hearer to let them sink in and become fruitful. If he only hears without responding – without doing something about it and committing himself to their meaning – then the words are in danger of being lost, or of never coming to anything. The whole story thus becomes a parable about the learner's responsibility, and about the importance of learning with one's whole will and obedience, and not merely with one's head.

E. The treasure and the pearl (Mat. 13:44-46)

The brief parables of the hidden treasure and the valuable pearl occur together and only in Mat. 13:44-46. I am considering them together because they closely resemble each other. Jesus says in Mat. 13:44-46 (ESV): "*The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.*"⁴⁵ *Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls,*⁴⁶ *who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.*"

Blomberg (1990, 279) expresses the meaning of both parables succinctly: "The kingdom of God is so valuable that it is worth sacrificing anything to gain it." Wenham states (p. 208):

The parable of the pearl depicts a rich man's search being rewarded by a find almost beyond price; the parable of the treasure portrays a poor man lighting on treasure unexpectedly. It is doubtful if we should see any significance in these differences. The significance of both parables lies in the two obvious features that they have in common; first the idea of finding something tremendously valuable, and second the thought of selling up everything to get it. In announcing the bringing in himself of the

kingdom of God, Jesus brought to people, first, good news of great joy, good news of God's promised and liberating revolution; and second, an invitation and a challenge – an invitation to receive the treasure and a challenge to give up all for it.

Of course Jesus is not saying that one buys one's way into the kingdom. He is saying that one cannot participate in the kingdom that he is bringing unless one values it enough to give oneself wholly to the call of discipleship. As he says earlier in Mat. 10:37-39 (ESV): "*Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.*"³⁸ *And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.*"³⁹ *Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."*

Wenham remarks (p. 208):

Of course, the kingdom is not something that can be bought; in that respect the two parables taken by themselves could be misleading and need to be complemented by others such as that of the prodigal son. But what these parables do make clear is that in calling people to follow him and to give up themselves, their money, and their old lives for the kingdom, Jesus was calling them to incalculable gain and great joy.

F. The barren fig tree (Lk. 13:6-9)

The parable of the barren fig tree occurs only at Lk. 13:6-9. It is immediately preceded by some people who were present telling Jesus about Pilate's killing of some Galilean pilgrims as they offered (or prepared to offer) their Passover sacrifice (13:1). It probably occurred near the temple as people approached with their sacrifices in hand. We have no extrabiblical account of this killing, though several have been proposed, but it is consistent with what is generally known of Pilate from Jewish sources.

Jesus answers them in 13:2-5 (ESV): "*Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?*"³ *No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.*"⁴ *Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?*"⁵ *No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."*

Jesus rebuked the crowds in Lk. 12:54-59 for failing to recognize that his arrival brought with it the need for a decision. With his coming, it now was time to choose to follow him in order to avoid judgment. In that light, the mention in 13:1 of the Galileans killed by Pilate seems to be an attempt at self-justification by suggesting that judgment is for *those* kind people, implying that it is not for *them*. The assumption behind the comment was the common idea that disasters come only on the exceptionally sinful, that disasters necessarily are God's retaliation for sin (recall Job's friends; see Jn. 9:1-3). This

is evident from Jesus' answer: "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?"

Jesus rejects the notion that disasters come only on the exceptionally sinful and then brings the issue back to them: "No, I tell you; but unless *you* repent, *you* will all likewise perish." They must make a decision; they cannot delude themselves into believing that judgment is a concern only for others. He repeats the point by adding an example of accidental deaths to their example of deliberate killing.

Jesus reinforces the need to repent to avoid condemnation with the parable of the barren fig tree. Luke 13:6-9 states (ESV): *And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. ⁷ And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' ⁸ And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. ⁹ Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."*

The point of the parable is that when it comes to repentance all the impenitent are on borrowed time. The master has gone the extra mile in his patience and forbearance. The time to repent is now. One who does not repent while the opportunity to do so exists will be condemned, cut down (and as John states in Lk. 3:9, "thrown into the fire"). Evans remarks (1990, 205): "The Parable of the Fig Tree illustrates that people will not always have an opportunity to repent and turn over a new leaf. Just as the reports concerning those who died (vv. 1-5) should awaken one to the realization of the nearness of judgment, so the present parable underscores that judgment cannot be put off forever."

The sudden and unexpected deaths of the Galileans and Jerusalemites highlight the fragility of life, the fact it is "a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes" (Jas. 4:14). Hultgren states (p. 245):

Set within the broader context of Luke 13:1-5, the Parable of the Barren Fig Tree is laden with a tone of urgency. Pilate's attack on the Galileans (13:1-3) was an atrocity carried out upon innocent persons – persons, at any rate, who were no better and no worse than anyone else. And the killing of the eighteen in Jerusalem, when the tower of Siloam fell upon them, was random, killing persons neither better nor worse than anyone else. Nevertheless, these incidents show how fragile and unpredictable life is. Therefore it is necessary for everyone to repent, lest they be caught off guard and perish.

G. The tower-builder and the king going to war (Lk. 14:28-33)

The paired parables of the tower-builder and the king going to war occur only at Lk. 14:28-33. The verses immediately preceding the parable (14:25-27) state (ESV): *Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, ²⁶ "If anyone comes to*

me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ *Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.*" Jesus then states in 14:28-33 (ESV): *"For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?"* ²⁹ *Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him,* ³⁰ *saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.'* ³¹ *Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand?"* ³² *And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace.* ³³ *So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."*

Having laid out for them the costly commitment that is necessary to be a disciple, Jesus gives a reason for his doing so (note "For" at the beginning of v. 28). He has done it because, as the parables show, only a fool would embark on an enterprise without first considering whether he has sufficient resources to complete it, an assessment that requires an understanding of what the enterprise will demand or cost. Failing to undertake such an assessment would result in humiliation in the case of the tower builder and slaughter in the case of the king being threatened.

Given the need to know the cost of an enterprise in order to evaluate whether to embark on it, a need illustrated by the parables, Jesus says in v. 33, "So therefore, any of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple." He laid out the costly commitment of discipleship in vv. 26-27, gave a reason for his doing so ("For") through the two parables, and then repeated the cost of discipleship (in different phrasing) as something the parables showed they needed to know ("therefore").

The parables are not about us building towers or winning wars. Building a tower and fighting a war merely are elements of the parables that are analogous to the decision to become a disciple in that wisdom dictates that one weigh what is involved before beginning the enterprise. That is all. We often say at weddings that marriage is not to be entered into lightly or unadvisedly; that goes double for Christian discipleship.

Here is how a number of scholars summarize the meaning of the parables. I quote so many at such length because I believe these parables address something crucial that too often is underplayed. Wenham states (p. 204-205):

Both parables emphasize the dangers of undertaking projects that are too costly – in terms of money or life – and the need for realistic forward planning. The point of the parables in Jesus' teaching is to emphasize the need for intending followers of Jesus to weigh up the heavy cost of what they are undertaking.

What is the cost? Jesus has spoken in the immediately preceding context of the need for would-be followers of his to 'hate' father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters and 'even his own life' and to take up the cross. . . . What Jesus is doing, as is clear from Matthew's equivalent

passage (Mt 10:37-38), is speaking of priorities and of the need for the revolution of God to take precedence over all other commitments, even family commitments. . . .

But the costs of discipleship are greater than this: Jesus speaks of 'hating' even one's own life and taking up the cross, and then, after the parables of the builder and the king, he says bluntly: 'Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple' (Lk. 14:33).⁵ . . . The revolution is not a spare-time activity or club that can be tacked on to a secular lifestyle; it involves 'hating' family, material possessions and one's own life and safety. In short, it demands total commitment such as Jesus himself exemplified. The revolution is something total in its glory and promise, but also in its present demands.

G. B. Caird states in *The Gospel of St. Luke* (Harmondsworth and Baltimore: Penguin, 1963), 179 (quoted in Blomberg [1990], 284):

The twin parables of the tower-builder and the king were not meant to deter any serious candidates for discipleship, but only to warn them that becoming a disciple was the most important enterprise a man could undertake and deserved at least as much consideration as he would give to business or politics. Nobody can be swept into the kingdom on a flood-tide of emotion; he must walk in with clear-eyed deliberation.

Snodgrass states (2008, 385-386):

In their present context the parables are clearly intended to warn against a premature and unaware acceptance of discipleship. . . .

. . . Discipleship is no light matter, and the urgency of the call does not diminish the seriousness of the commitment. With these parables Jesus does not seek to deter discipleship, but his goal is not merely to gain as large a following as possible. . . .

The point of the parables is clear. Who would begin to build a tower without analyzing whether he or she had resources to accomplish the task? No one. What king would think of going out to defeat an attacking king without analyzing whether resources were sufficient for victory or whether submission is more advisable? No king would. Just as foolish would be any thought of being a disciple without assessing the impact on one's life. Discipleship changes allegiances with family, requires the willingness to die, shifts the focus off self-centeredness, places one at the disposal of another, and changes the way one handles financial resources. T. W. Manson reportedly commented, "Salvation may be free, but it is not cheap."

⁵ Blomberg properly cautions (1990, 282): "But 'to renounce all' does not necessarily mean literally to abandon all. As noted above, Jesus sometimes does make that demand of an individual, but many times he does not. Rather the idea is one of giving up anything which would stand in the way of full-fledged service for Christ."

Evans states (1990, 229):

The point that Jesus is making is that whenever one sets out to undertake a difficult (or dangerous) task one should carefully assess one's resources. In these parables one's money (first parable) or one's soldiers (second parable) should be understood as one's level of commitment to Jesus. If one lacks adequate commitment then one should not follow. Rather, if one is to follow Jesus, then a total commitment is expected, a commitment arising out of a careful, thoughtful consideration.

Nolland states (1993, 766):

The parables in 14:28-32 provide support for the challenge of vv 26-27. It is all very well to want to be a disciple, but the demands of vv 26-27 identify the necessary resources, without which there could be no successful implementation of discipleship. To rush without thought into the project of discipleship is like the person who begins to build a tower without the resources needed to complete it: he looks ridiculous. Or it is to be like the king who when challenged by another king rushes out to sure defeat, without considering that with half the troops of his opponent he can anticipate only disaster: far better if he had sued for terms of peace.

VII. Living as Kingdom Participants

A. Attitude toward God – The humble servant (Lk. 17:7-10)

The parable of the humble servant occurs only at Lk. 17:7-10. It follows Jesus' instruction in 17:1-5 about not creating stumbling blocks for fellow Christians and the need to forgive a penitent brother or sister repeatedly. Jesus says in 17:7-10 (ESV): "*Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and recline at table'? ⁸ Will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink'? ⁹ Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? ¹⁰ So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'*"

The parable illustrates what our attitude should be in serving God. The point is that our obedience to God as disciples, even in matters as difficult as repeated forgiveness, is no favor to him so that he owes us anything for doing it. In meeting the demands of the kingdom of God we simply are doing what we should be doing. It is fulfillment of our duty not something that gives us any claim on God. In Blomberg's words (1990, 263), "God's people should never presume that their obedience to his commands has earned them his favor." Evans states (1990, 254-255):

Jesus does not mean to rule out heavenly reward for faithful service, but he means only to instruct his disciples as to how they should think. The point of the saying is concerned with attitude. An arrogant attitude views God as fortunate for having people like us in his service (perhaps this was a Pharisaic attitude). The proper attitude, however, is thankfulness for having the privilege and opportunity to serve God. What reward we have for serving God is not earned, but is given because God is gracious. No Christian can boast before God (see Rom. 3:27).

The rhetorical question of v. 9 literally is: "He does not have *gratitude* [*charin*] toward the servant/slave because he did the things that were commanded, does he?" The gratitude referred to is more than a mere verbal expression; it carries the sense of indebtedness. On this use of the word (*charis*), Ceslas Spicq states in *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, trans. and ed. James D. Ernest (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 3:503-504, "A person does not stop at merely feeling gratitude toward a benefactor but makes an effort to pay him back, as if paying off a debt by returning benefit for benefit."

This, of course, is not a full-blown view of God. As Wenham states (p. 191):

[I]t is clear from other parts of Jesus' teaching that the Lord does treat his slaves as his children, not just as servants (see the parable of the prodigal son and Jn. 15:15). It is also true that the Lord rewards his faithful servants, and that, far from treating them callously, he will himself sit them down at table and serve them (see Lk 12:37 . . .) But this is all his generosity: it is because of him that they can work in the kingdom in the first place, and, although he chooses to reward them for their service, they can never claim credit for their work. Their attitude can only be that of humble, grateful servants.

B. Living righteously before men – Salt and light (Mat. 5:13-16)

Jesus' description of the disciples as the salt of the earth and the light of the world occurs only in Mat. 5:13-16 (but see Mk. 9:50 and Lk. 14:34). Jesus says (ESV): "*You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.* ¹⁴ *You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.* ¹⁵ *Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house.* ¹⁶ *In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*"

In Mat. 5:11-12 Jesus instructed the disciples to rejoice in the persecution they inevitably will face by focusing on the great reward in store for those who endure in faith. In Mat. 5:13-16 he warns them about two other reactions persecution might produce.

Salt had a number of uses in the ancient world most of which were beneficial. It was then, as today, a seasoning that improved the flavor of food. It also seems to have served some kind of hygienic function in the case of newborns, whether as a cleaning solution or to retard bacteria and thus odor in the child's swaddling cloth. But salt's most critical use in the ancient world was as a preservative. It slowed the decay of meat, which in the days before refrigeration was an extremely valuable effect.

Whether one focuses only on salt's use as a preservative or includes in the reference its other beneficial uses, the quality of salt under consideration in the metaphor is the powerful and positive effect it has on that to which it is applied. Jesus says to his disciples in 5:13 that they are the salt of the earth because in living the way Jesus calls them to live they will have a powerful and positive effect on the world. They will benefit the world by influencing its standards and practices and by drawing people into the kingdom of God.

But Jesus adds the warning that if Christians abandon the faith and thus surrender their distinctive character and ethics – become tasteless or unsalty salt – if they return to being like the world in the hope of deflecting the hostility and persecution about which he has been speaking, they cease to be of any benefit to the world. If instead of rejoicing and being glad in the face of insult, persecution, and slander they jettison their distinctiveness and blend back in with the world, if they fall away, they are suitable only to be discarded, thrown out into the street.

The language of rejection in v. 13b seems to move beyond loss of the benefit that they as faithful disciples would have on the world to indicating that the apostates themselves, those who have abandoned the faith, will be subject to divine condemnation. The suggestion that salt that has lost its saltiness *cannot* regain it is a way of putting the danger of apostasy in its starkest terms. In other words, like the later writer of Hebrews would do in Heb. 6:4-6, I think Jesus is giving a worst-case scenario to fortify his point about the danger.

Light is a symbol of righteousness and enlightenment. In Jn. 8:12 Jesus says of himself, "I am the light of the world." Christians are to be "the light of the world" in that they are to show the light of Christ in the way they live (Eph. 5:8-9; Phil. 2:15). We are a living demonstration of the arrival of the kingdom of God (Wilkins, 215).

A "city on a hill" and a "lighted lamp" relate to Christians being the light of the world in that, just as concealment is incompatible with the nature of a city on a hill and contrary to the purpose of a lighted lamp, concealment is incompatible with the nature of a Christian and contrary to his or her purpose.

A living faith in Jesus Christ will inevitably express itself, will result in a transformed life; it cannot be concealed. A faith that does not manifest itself in works is what James in Jas. 2:14-26 calls a "dead faith," a mere intellectual assent that is

insufficient to save. If it is concealed, if it makes no observable difference in a person's life, it is not a biblical, saving faith.

Moreover, concealing one's Christian life is contrary to one's role as a source of light for the world. It makes no more sense to hide one's Christ-motivated righteousness from other people than to put a lamp under a basket where it cannot fulfill the purpose for which it was lit, namely to provide light! Rather, Christians are openly to live exemplary lives, not to parade our goodness but to direct attention to God who is the source of this living and of every good gift.

Jesus is here warning about the temptation to go "underground" with one's faith, to be a "secret Christian," because that is a predictable response to the hostility and persecution about which he has been speaking. If instead of rejoicing and being glad in the face of insult, persecution, and slander they seek to hide their Christian distinctiveness, they are subverting their mission.

C. In relation to others

1. The lost sheep (Mat. 18:12-14)

The parable of the lost sheep in Mat. 18:12-14 and Lk. 15:1-7 are variations of a parable that Jesus told at different times and for different purposes. I discussed Luke's version in the section on the kingdom being good news for the needy. In Matthew the parable comes right on the heels of Jesus admonishing the disciples not to look down on or to adopt the world's contempt toward even a single Christian. He says in 18:10 (ESV): "*See that you do not despise one of these little ones.*" The word translated "despise" is a form of *καταφρονέω*, which BDAG defines as "to look down on someone or something, with contempt or aversion, with implication that one considers the object of little value."

Jesus backs up that admonition with the statement (ESV): "*For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.*" He is warning them against viewing other Christians as being of little value by saying that angels, who "belong" to Christians in the sense they serve them (Heb. 1:14), have immediate access to God and constantly make known to him the circumstance of their charges (stated in courtly language for personal access to the king). This is a means of emphasizing that God will in no way overlook the situation of even the lowliest of his people; his omniscience, which is foolproof, is backed by angelic "whistle blowers." His being unaware is a double impossibility!

Jesus says in Mat. 18:12-14, which is the next verse because v. 11 is not included in the most important manuscripts (ESV): "*What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?*"¹³ *And if he finds it, truly, I say*

to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. ¹⁴ So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish."

The parable here is a statement of God's intense concern for every one of his "little ones," for every disciple. The point is that if God feels this way about every disciple, then we must be very careful how we treat every disciple. We can treat no Christian as though he or she were expendable. We must reflect God's interest in their not perishing, which means we must value them rather than look down on them and must act with concern for their spiritual well-being. Part of that concern is being willing to confront them with their sin as Jesus makes clear in Mat. 18:15-20.

2. The unforgiving servant (Mat. 18:23-35)

The parable of the unforgiving servant occurs only at Mat. 18:23-35. It is preceded by the Lord's discussion of the need to bring a Christian to repentance, through disfellowshipping if necessary (Mat. 18:15-20), and the need to forgive a penitent Christian repeatedly (Mat. 18:21-22). Jesus then says in Mat. 18:23-35 (ESV): *"Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. ²⁵ And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' ²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. ³² Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. ³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."*

As I said with regard to the parable of the talents, a talent originally was a unit of weight that, based on the value of that weight of gold or silver, had by the first century had become a unit of monetary value. A talent was equal to about 6,000 denarii, and a denarius was the standard day's wage for a day laborer. So a talent was worth about 20 years wages for a day laborer (who might work around 300 days per year). Thus, ten thousand talents would be 200,000 years of wages, and a hundred denarii would be less than one year of wages.

The point of the parable is clear: it is an outrage for a Christian, who has been forgiven a breathtakingly large sin-debt to God to turn around and refuse to forgive the

relatively miniscule sin-debt of a fellow Christian who seeks forgiveness. (The reference to "your brother" in v. 35 ties Jesus' response to Peter's original question in v. 21.) Such a refusal to forgive establishes that the person is no longer a disciple, no longer someone who is surrendered to the Lord Jesus. That person will be condemned. He will receive what his unforgiven sin deserves.

Other texts make the same point that failing to show mercy will result in condemnation. In Mat. 5:7 Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." The Lord's prayer includes in Mat. 6:12 the statement "and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors," and in Mat. 6:14-15 Jesus says, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

As I have said, biblical faith is not mere intellectual assent but the "yes" of one's total being, a surrender that necessarily and inevitably finds expression in one's life. As Daniel Wallace has put it, "Faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is not alone." To adamantly refuse to forgive a brother or sister is to adamantly refuse to obey a central command of the Lord, a command he links expressly with our forgiveness. Unless one repents of that rebellion, one will receive no forgiveness and thus will be condemned. Snodgrass states (2008, 74-75): "The fear of works righteousness is far too exaggerated. Would that there were an equal fear of being found inactive. Works righteousness is not the problem of most modern Christians. We would do better to realize that if we do not work, we are not righteous."

If the details of the parable are pressed, it indicates the person actually was forgiven, which means he at that time had a saving faith. In that case, his refusal to forgive reflects a change in the nature of his faith; it reflects a loss of saving faith the consequence of which is condemnation. But perhaps the retraction of forgiveness serves as an analogy to a *seeming* or *presumed* forgiveness being exposed as nonexistent by the refusal to forgive. In other words, perhaps the forgiveness is "retracted" in the figurative sense that one is shown not to have what one (and others) thought one had. Either way, an adamant refusal to forgive is a marker of condemnation.

3. The good Samaritan (Lk. 10:30-37)

The parable of the good Samaritan may be the best known of all the Lord's parables. It occurs only at Lk. 10:30-37. Jesus tells it as part of an exchange with an expert in the law, what we would call an Old Testament scholar, which begins in 10:25.

The lawyer tests Jesus with a fundamental question: "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" As Nolland notes (1993, 585), "Eternal life here is not so much life after death as life in the end-time kingdom of God (see Dan 12:2)." In Bock's words (1996, 1023), "The lawyer's question is really this: 'What must I do to share in the resurrection of the righteous at the end?'" Jesus asks the lawyer what he understands God to have revealed about salvation in the Law, and the lawyer says that the key to salvation

in the Old Testament is a wholesale devotion to God and a commitment to the welfare of one's neighbor, the latter being a subset of the former. Jesus says he answered correctly and tells him that if he does what he has described that he will indeed inherit eternal life.

The unstated assumption in the Lord's answer that the lawyer will inherit eternal life if he does what he described is that wholehearted devotion to God will lead to his becoming a disciple because devotion to God cannot be separated from devotion to his Son. Indeed, Jesus has just spoken boldly of his identity in 10:16-24, apparently in the presence of the lawyer, including the statement that "he who rejects me rejects him who sent me" (v. 16) and the statement that "no one knows . . . who the Father is except . . . anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (v. 22). Whether or not the lawyer grasped such subtleties, Jesus' statement was true.

The link between devotion to God the Father and devotion to Christ the Son is, of course, specified elsewhere in the N.T. For example, 1 Jn. 2:23 says: No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also. 1 John 5:3a says: For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments, and 1 Jn 3:23 says: And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. This is why believers sometimes are referred to as "those who love God" (1 Cor. 2:9; Jas. 1:12, 2:5).

The lawyer apparently reads Jesus' statement in v. 28, "do this and you will live," as leaving open the possibility that he is *not* doing it, and out of his desire to justify himself he asks "And who is my neighbor?" Jews had different views as to who was and who was not covered by the term "neighbor," and the lawyer was seeking a definition of neighbor that was narrow enough to fit his conduct so that he could feel confident about where he stood. It is in response to that question that Jesus tells the parable.

Luke 10:30-37 states (ESV): *Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. ³⁴ He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" ³⁷ He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise."*

The key players in the story are the victim, a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan. The victim is described merely as "a certain man." The priest was one of the officials responsible for the worship and sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem, many of whom resided in Jericho (Snodgrass [2008], 345). The Levites assisted the priests in their duties

(e.g., playing instruments for the worship and maintaining security in the temple buildings).

Jews and Samaritans had a long history of contempt toward one another. The Samaritans possibly were the Jews' least favorite people. Jews viewed them as the descendants of foreigners from Mesopotamia who colonized the region after the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 722/721 B.C. (Modern scholars doubt that this is an accurate view of their origin, but it was the accepted understanding of Jews in the first century.) Jews also viewed the Samaritans as heretics, as people whose Jewish faith had long been corrupted by pagan influences. That is why, as John notes in Jn. 4:9b, Jews had no dealings with Samaritans.

The Samaritans, on the other hand, thought Israel had apostatized, beginning as early as the removal of the nation's cultic center from Gerizim to Shiloh (and eventually to Jerusalem), and saw themselves as the true people of God, descendants of a faithful nucleus of ancient Israel. (Jesus' comment in Jn. 4:22 makes clear they were wrong in that regard.) In 128 B.C. John Hyrcanus destroyed the Samaritans' sanctuary at Mount Gerizim, and around A.D. 6 or 7 some Samaritans scattered bones in the Jerusalem Temple during Passover. In A.D. 52 some Samaritans massacred a group of Galilean pilgrims. This was after Jesus' time on earth, but it says something about the tension and hostility between the groups. For Jews going to Jerusalem from Galilee, going around rather than through Samaria was a matter of safety as well as personal repugnance.

After telling the parable, Jesus asks the lawyer (v. 36) who is seeking a definition of neighbor that will justify his own conduct, "Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" He can only answer, "The one who showed him mercy."

The parable pulls the lawyer to rethink his concept of neighbor. In asking who *is* my neighbor he was seeking to identify fixed markers like nationality, ethnicity, and religion by which some can be excluded from the definition. In admitting that the Samaritan proved to be a neighbor to the anonymous victim, he was admitting that one's status as a neighbor is not determined by being in the same or a similar social classification or category. So "neighbor" in the command to love one's neighbor does not limit one's ethical duty to people within certain classes or categories; it refers to anyone within one's reach, within one's ability to help. Jesus is leading the lawyer to see that no human being, regardless of how he is categorized, can be placed beyond one's duty to love, written off as one to whom no ethical obligation is owed.

When the lawyer admits implicitly that neighbor includes anyone within one's reach who needs help, Jesus tells him, "You go, and *do* likewise." He goes from leading the lawyer to the right perspective on loving one's neighbor to the personal application in the lawyer's life. You go and love your neighbor by having mercy on any human who is in need regardless of how he differs from you.

D. Specifically with regard to money

1. The rich fool (Lk. 12:16-21)

The parable of the rich fool occurs only at Lk. 12:16-21. It follows immediately after Jesus' warning in 12:15 about the danger of greed or materialism. Luke 12:16-21 (ESV): *And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully,¹⁷ and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?'¹⁸ And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'²⁰ But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'²¹ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God."*

This rich man has such a bountiful crop that he does not have room to store it. Sharing his bounty with the poor never crosses his mind. Instead, he plans to build larger barns so he can keep all of it for his own use and thus ensure easy living in the future. He is labeled a fool because he chose to hoard his wealth rather than be generous with it as God demands and he is going to die in that state this very night, his expectation that he would live many more years notwithstanding.

Not only will he not enjoy the fruit of his hoarding, but the implication is that he will be called to account for his lack of discipleship, his refusal to embrace the ethics of the kingdom. God will not be concerned with how full his barns were. Wenham remarks (p. 140), "Living for the revolution is the antithesis of living selfishly and just for the here and now; it involves being rich towards God, investing in God's bank." Bock notes (1996, 1154), "The parable does not condemn planning or wealth per se. Rather, Jesus' complaint is against the person who takes wealth and directs it totally toward the self."

2. The unjust steward (Lk. 16:1-9)

The parable of the unjust steward occurs only at Lk. 16:1-9. Snodgrass (2008, 401) describes it as "notoriously difficult." Luke 16:1-9 states (ESV): *He also said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions.² And he called him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.'³ And the manager said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.⁴ I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.'⁵ So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'⁶ He said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.'⁷ Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' He said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.'⁸ The master*

commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.⁹ And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings."

The manager was an agent of the owner, someone with the authority to act on his behalf. The debtors probably were people who had contracted with the owner to farm his land in exchange for giving him a portion of the produce. The owner is satisfied from reports that the manager is incompetent. He fires the manager and demands that he wrap up matters by providing an accounting of his management. The manager cheats the owner by reducing what the debtors owe him in order to ingratiate himself with the debtors. That is why the manager is labeled dishonest or unrighteous in v. 8.

The reductions the manager makes are quite substantial. One hundred *baths* (measures) of oil would be about 800 or 900 gallons, which would be equivalent to about three years of wages for the average worker. He cuts that in half. One hundred *cors* (measures) of wheat would be nearly 1100 bushels, which would be equivalent to seven and one-half years of wages for the average worker. He reduces that by a fifth, which means he gave both debtors the same total discount, about 1.5 years worth of wages.

Some argue that the manager did not really cheat the owner but simply removed the interest the owner had impermissibly charged or removed his own inflated commission. But the standard interest rates do not match the amount of the deductions so hearers would not assume interest was being removed. If the manager charged that much for commissions he hardly would be in dire straits when fired, and it is doubtful the manager's own commission would be included on the statement of what was owed to the owner. Perhaps most importantly, there is nothing in the text that even hints at the reduction being illegal interest or a commission. The reference to the manager as dishonest or unrighteous and the fact he urges the first debtor to change the amount *quickly* point clearly to his having cheated the owner.

In the real world, the manager would have been punished for his calculated fraud, but parables need not track reality at all points. The owner in the parable praises the manager, despite the injustice of his conduct, for the limited reason that he acted quickly and shrewdly to insure his own future. He is not condoning his methods only his having taken effective action. It is something like what we mean in our phrase "giving the devil his due."

In v. 8b Jesus gives the significance of the parable in saying "For the sons of this world (lit. *age*) are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light." The manager is a "son of this age" and as such is distinguished from "sons of the light," who implicitly are *not* of this age. They are not of this age in that they participate in the new age that is breaking into the present in the coming of the kingdom. Bock (1996, 1333) says, "In pointing to the children of this age, there is an inherent comparison with God's children as the children of 'the age to come.'"

The point is that the sons of this age, represented by the shrewd manager, know how to operate in their arena, the world, for their future benefit better than the sons of the new age know how to operate in their arena, the kingdom, for their future benefit. The praise of the sons of this age functions as a criticism of the sons of light for their relative ignorance regarding how to live in keeping with the age to which they belong. Green puts it this way (1997, 593): "Children of this age,' [Jesus] observes, understand how the world works and use it to their benefit; why do 'children of light' not understand the ways of the kingdom of God?"

That is why he exhorts them in the next verse (v. 9), "And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings." It is a call to live in accordance with the ethics of the kingdom by being generous with one's wealth.

"Unrighteous wealth" in the ESV is literally "mammon of unrighteousness." "Mammon" is an Aramaic term for money or possessions, and the phrase probably means money that tends to corrupt or lead to unrighteousness, money that is so easily put to wrong use (see Snodgrass [2008], 415). Perhaps that is the sense of "worldly wealth" in NIV, TNIV, and NET. As Robert Stein notes in *Luke*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 416, the phrase "when it fails" (often translated "when it is gone") "refers to the final day when the possessions of this world and the world itself come to an end, not when one goes broke like the prodigal son." It is the time of wealth's end referred to in Jas. 5:1-3 (ESV): *Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. ² Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. ³ Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire.*

The "they" who will receive one into the eternal dwellings could refer to the faithful poor one helped who already have been received by God but more probably refers to the angels as representatives of God. Snodgrass (2008, 415) paraphrases the meaning of v. 9 this way: "Put yourself in good position through your use of money, which so easily leads you astray, so that when this age is over God will receive you into his eternal dwelling." In other words, be faithful to God in your use of the wealth with which he blesses you. Have a genuine faith that expresses itself in deeds, and you will receive the blessings that accompany faith.

3. The rich man and Lazarus (Lk. 16:19-31)

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus occurs only at Lk. 16:19-31. Jesus says (ESV): *"There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰ And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹ who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. ²² The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, ²³ and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. ²⁴ And*

*he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.'*²⁵ *But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish.'*²⁶ *And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.'*²⁷ *And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house--'*²⁸ *for I have five brothers--so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.'*²⁹ *But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.'*³⁰ *And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'*³¹ *He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'"*

People sometimes wonder whether this is a parable or the recounting of an actual event, but virtually all modern scholars agree that it is a parable. Indeed, Snodgrass (2008, 426) says he is unaware of *any* modern scholar who would deny it is a parable.

Though obscured in many English translations, it begins with the phrase "a certain man," which is how Jesus introduces a number of undisputed parables in Luke: the good Samaritan (Lk. 10:30), the barren fig tree (Lk. 13:6), the great feast (Lk. 14:16), the lost (prodigal) son (Lk. 15:11), the unjust steward (Lk. 16:1), and the minas (Lk. 19:12). It is true that this is the only of Jesus' parables in which the characters have names (Lazarus and Abraham), but there is nothing about the nature of a parable that precludes the characters having names. The fact the characters usually do not have names does not mean they cannot have names. As Craig Keener notes (1993, 236), "[s]ome Jewish parables named a character or two." Notice also how the name Lazarus fits this character's role. Lazarus is the Greek form of Eleazer and means "he (whom) God has helped" (see, Stein [1992], 423).

The contrast is between the fate of a rich man who lived in great luxury and the fate of Lazarus, a poor, disabled, physically suffering, and starving fellow Jew who was laid at the rich man's front gate, no doubt by relatives hoping to incite the rich man's compassion. After death, Lazarus is in a blessed state in the realm of the dead, the intermediate state between death and resurrection, whereas the rich man is in a tormented state. In the far distance, he can see Abraham and Lazarus together.

In his flaming agony, the rich man calls out to Abraham to have pity on him and to send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water to cool his tongue. However symbolically one understands the scene, the point of absolute dreadfulness cannot be missed. The rich man is reminded that in his lifetime the disparity of circumstances did not trouble him at all. On the contrary, he chose to maintain that disparity by refusing to do anything to ease Lazarus's suffering. His present agony is the consequence of that choice. He opted to maximize his comfort rather than to heed God's command to be compassionate toward the needy. He chose to serve money rather than God (see, Lk. 16:13-15).

Deuteronomy 15:7-8 states (ESV): *"If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, ⁸ but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be."* Isaiah 58:6-7 states (ESV): *"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?"*

Snodgrass states (2008, 430):

The fact [the rich man] wants his brothers to repent (v. 30) shows that he recognizes his own error. Surely his judgment is based on the injustice of the juxtaposition of his wealth and Lazarus's poverty and his neglect to do anything about it. The rich man's error is precisely that of those on the left in the parable of the Sheep and the Goats: neglect of the poor and those in need. Only in hades does the rich man raise his eyes to see, but even there his concern is only for his own kind, his brothers. The parable forces the understanding that Lazarus, the child of Abraham, was also his brother and should have been the object of his concern.

The rich man also is told that his request for mercy is now impossible to heed. The two realities in the intermediate state of the dead are separated by an impassable chasm. There are no relocations. The choice we make in this life with regard to God's revolution is final. One will either be blessed beyond measure, first in the intermediate state and then in the consummated kingdom, or suffer beyond measure, first in the intermediate state and then in hell, the eternal abode of the damned.

The rich man then asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his five brothers to warn them so they will repent before it is too late and thus avoid his fate. The implication is that his warning had been inadequate. That is what he wants to remedy in the case of his brothers. Abraham rejects this plea of ignorance, refusing to send Lazarus. Instead he replies, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them."

As noted above, the Old Testament provides clear instructions about caring for the poor and needy and clear warnings about neglecting them. Many other passages could be cited. The rich man and his brothers are without excuse. They had these Scriptures but simply chose to ignore them.

The rich man does not like this reply and argues that someone like Lazarus returning from the dead would have a much greater impact than the Old Testament. After all, the Old Testament had not been an adequate warning for him. He reasons that had there been a visible demonstration of the afterlife in the form of a resurrection, he would have acted otherwise. Abraham rejects the claim that the problem of the rich man and his

brothers was lack of evidence. He says, "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead."

The problem was not a lack of evidence but their unwillingness to hear the word of God. That unwillingness will cause them to ignore or explain away some extra or special revelation just as they did the other. It is a heart issue. That was, of course, demonstrated in Jesus' resurrection. Even after he rose from the grave, many Jews, including Pharisees whom Luke labels "lovers of money" (Lk. 16:14), refused to join his revolution with its commitment to the poor. Jesus did not abolish the Old Testament's concern for the poor; he authoritatively expressed the heart of the Old Testament teaching about compassion for the needy (e.g., Lk. 12:13-21, 16:1-15, 18:18-27).

Though this is a parable, I believe one is justified in drawing from it some truths about one's state after death. The main point of the story is to warn people of the danger of rejecting kingdom ethics (in this instance, the ethic of concern for the needy), which is a rejection of God. Jesus indicates to his hearers that they would face irreversible, conscious torment if they rejected God's will during their lives. If people are not conscious after death, as some groups claim, Jesus would be warning them by means of a threat that was untrue. One could argue that the portrayal of conscious torment was hyperbole designed to dramatize the horror of unconscious existence, but I do not see how a first-century Jew would understand it that way given that among the beliefs about the afterlife in first-century Judaism was the belief that the spirits of the ungodly were tormented and the spirits of the godly were blessed in the period between death and the day of judgment (see, e.g., 2 Esdras 7:75ff.).

E. In relation to prayer

1. The friend at midnight (Lk. 11:5-8)

The parable of the friend at midnight occurs only at Lk. 11:5-8, which states (ESV): *And he said to them, "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves, ⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; ⁷ and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything'?" ⁸ I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs."*

As the ESV makes clear, the question begun in v. 5 with "Which of you" runs to the end of v. 7. It is a rhetorical question the understood answer to which is "No one, of course." We know the understood answer is "No one" because the question "Which of you" implies a negative answer to some hypothetical action in each of its ten other occurrences in the Gospels (Snodgrass [2008], 442). David Crump states in *Knocking on Heaven's Door: A New Testament Theology of Petitionary Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Baker,

2006), 70, "it is generally admitted that the introductory formula 'which of you' in 11:5 begins a rhetorical question that expects a negative response: 'No one, of course!' The rhetorical question encompasses the whole of 11:5-7."

The point is that in their culture, which was a shame-honor culture that placed a premium on hospitality, it would not happen that the hypothesized request would be refused. No one would refuse to get up and give his friend what he needed. Such a refusal would be culturally unthinkable (see Snodgrass, [2008], 442). As Snodgrass notes (2008, 442):

Commentators *regularly* assume that the sleeping friend initially refused the request but then relented or that the petitioner knocks repeatedly or asks repeatedly. *The parable has no refusal and does not mention knocking at all, nor does it mention any repetition of the request.* The parable is merely a straightforward question describing circumstances of a request that no one would refuse. The ideas of continued knocking and asking come from vv. 9-10, but they are *not* part of the parable, and it is important not to read them into the parable.

The correct meaning of ἀναίδεια in the last clause of v. 8 ("yet because of his ἀναίδειαν") is shamelessness (REB), here meaning a willingness to disregard commonly accepted social norms. That is the idea behind the ESV's "impudence" (rudeness) and the TNIV's "shameless audacity." Crump declares (p. 67-68):

One point that can be stated categorically is that the traditional translation of *anaideia* as "persistence" is incorrect and should be consigned once and for all to a short paragraph among the historical oddities of biblical (mis)interpretation. Lexical analysis of *anaideia* in ancient literature proves conclusively that it was never used to denote persistence until Christian writers appropriated the word for themselves under the obvious influence of Luke 11:8. When Luke wrote his Gospel, the word had a decidedly negative sense, referring "to people who have no proper sense of shame and willingly engage in improper conduct," freely disregarding all commonly accepted social norms. Words such as shamelessness, impudence, and immodesty are typical synonyms.

Apparently waking up a friend (and maybe his family) in the middle of the night under the circumstances of the parable would be socially inappropriate, but despite that fact everyone understood that it would trigger the sleeping friend's social duty of hospitality so that, even if (a better translation than "even though") he were not motivated by friendship, he still would comply with the request. The point is that if a request of a human friend to meet a need will not be turned down despite having been made with a strike against it, how much more can God be counted on to respond to the requests of his children to meet their needs? Snodgrass remarks (2008, 448):

The parable does not invite rudeness in praying any more than it suggests that God is asleep. The parable does not teach that God is a friend, nor that hearing is certain if we weary God through continual prayer . . . The parable addressed the implied question, "Will God respond to prayer?" and argues as follows: "If among humans a request is granted even when or because it is rude, how much more will your heavenly Father respond to your requests?"

2. The unjust judge (Lk. 18:1-8)

The parable of the unjust judge occurs only at Lk. 18:1-8. It is the final unit of a section that begins in 17:20 (see, e.g., Green [1997], 627-628; Crump, 79; Snodgrass [2008], 453). Nolland states (1993, 851):

There is a fairly broad recognition that the natural section here runs from 17:20 to 18:8: each of the units deals in some way with the timing of God's future intervention in the world (using the language of the coming of the kingdom of God or of the coming of the Son of Man). The final unit 18:1-8 is bound to the large central unit (17:22-37) by the inclusion of 18:8b with its reference to the coming of the Son of Man. The preceding 17:20-21 is bound to this same central unit by the inclusion in v. 21 of ἰδοὺ ὧδε ἢ ἐκεῖ, ἰδοὺ (lit. "behold here or there behold"), which is clearly linked to v. 23.

In the first unit, 17:20-21, the Pharisees ask Jesus when the kingdom of God was coming. He tells them that the kingdom of God is not an exclusively future phenomenon, as their question assumes, but rather is "among them," is already breaking into the world in his person and ministry. The new world is already being planted. The kind of great and unmistakable heavenly signs they are seeking as markers of the kingdom's arrival (e.g., Bock [1996], 1412) are associated not with its arrival but with its consummation. There certainly are signs of its arrival in Christ's ministry, but they are a kind more susceptible to misinterpretation and to being rationalized away by those bent on not grasping their import than are the cosmic phenomena of the Pharisees' expectation.

In the second unit, 17:22-37, Jesus instructs his disciples about the kingdom but in their case he focuses on its consummation rather than its inauguration. As Green states (1997, 632-633): "For the Pharisees he emphasizes the presence of God's project in response to their concern about its future. For these disciples on the other hand, who might be tempted to think in terms of the full realization of the kingdom in the present, Jesus emphasizes the future climax of God's purpose." He tells them that days are coming when they will be longing for the consummation without experiencing it. Green states (1997, 633):

"One of the days of the Son of Man" refers to the time of the end, when the Son of Man will be revealed. Consequently, Jesus is prophesying that,

during the "coming days" of distress, the disciples will hunger for the final resolution. . . . [T]he disciples will long for the end in order that they might avoid the disquiet and pain of the present. Because of this, they might find reports of obscure appearances of the Son of Man alluring. Such reports stand in contrast, though, with Jesus' assurance that the revelation of the Son of Man at the end will be anything but obscure. Like lightning that lights up the whole sky so that all can see it, so prominent and pervasive will be the coming of the Son of Man.

Verse 25 specifies that the end will not precede the Lord's suffering. On the contrary, his suffering is integral to God's plan. Verses 26-30 teach that the Lord's coming, his being revealed, will be analogous to the judgments meted out in the days of Noah and the days of Lot in that many people will be absorbed with matters of everyday life and unprepared for the arrival of the cataclysmic judgment.

Verses 31-33 are a warning not to have a heart so invested in earthly possessions that on that Day one goes back for them as though they are a basis for life in the eschaton. That reflects the kind of identification with the present world that ends up costing one eternal life. Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it.

Verses 34-35 show that being involved in everyday pursuits is not the basis of judgment. On the contrary, the judgment at Christ's return will divide between two people involved in the same everyday pursuit (sleeping and grinding grain). The question is "the nature of one's dispositions, one's commitments, one's attachments, one's ultimate loyalty" (Green [1997], 636). The disciples ask in v. 37 about the location of the judgment. Jesus tells them, in effect, not to worry about that because the location of the judgment will be as obvious as the location of a corpse to vultures (or the location of a corpse being circled by vultures).

The third and final unit of the section beginning at 17:20 is 18:1-8. I have modified the ESV rendering in a few places: *And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.* ² *He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man.* ³ *And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.'* ⁴ *For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man,* ⁵ *yet because this widow [is causing me trouble], I will give her justice, [lest by coming she may blacken my eye in the end].* ⁶ *And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says.* ⁷ *And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night, [even though he delays over them]?"* ⁸ *I tell you, he will give justice to them [suddenly]. [But] when the Son of Man comes, will he find [the] faith on earth?"*

The unifying theme of the entire section (17:20 – 18:8) is the coming of the kingdom of God. In the lengthy middle unit, 17:22-37, Jesus instructs his disciples about the consummation of the kingdom at his return. He tells them they are going to experience a time when they long for the consummation, so much so that they will be

vulnerable to false reports of its having occurred. The parable is part of his continuing instruction of the disciples about his return, as shown by the reference to his coming in the last part of v. 8.

Luke 18:1 says the upshot of the parable is that the disciples should always pray and not lose heart. As Snodgrass says (2008, 457), "Luke's concern in 18:1 is not prayer in general, but praying and not becoming weary (or giving up, *enkakein*) with respect to the *eschaton*, the time when deliverance comes. The injunction to pray and not give up derives its significance from the context of the whole eschatological discourse, which began in 17:20." As explained below, the point of the parable is that as they long for the consummation without seeing it (17:22) they must never lose the heart to keep praying, they must never lose their expectation that God will indeed answer their pleas and vindicate them.

The parable is about a judge who chose repeatedly to deny justice to a widow, to ignore her valid claim. Her repeated appeals were causing some kind of trouble for him, so he decided he had better do the right thing out of concern that her efforts ultimately would shame him, blacken his reputation.

Rather than merely being bothered by her appeals, I understand v. 5 to say that her efforts were causing him some kind of unspecified trouble. For some reason he wanted to sweep her just claim under the rug, but her persistence was drawing increasing attention to his corruption. The word in v. 5 that most commonly is translated as make weary or wear out (a form of $\acute{\upsilon}\pi\omega\pi\iota\acute{\alpha}\zeta\omega$) literally means to blacken one's eye. Many scholars are convinced that its metaphorical meaning here is not to wearying or wearing the man out but to shaming him, to damaging his reputation (see, Crump, 81-82). Crump remarks (p. 82 fn. 7): "Some object to this translation on the grounds of the judge's 'disregard for men' in 18:2, 4, claiming that this entails a lack of interest in what others think of him. Showing disregard for others (the judge's demeanor in 18:2, 4), however, is quite different from others showing disregard for you (what the judge hopes to avoid in 18:5)."

In v. 6 Jesus calls attention to the fact the unrighteous judge says he will grant the woman justice. He then asks, in essence, in v. 7: If despite a delay this unjust, self-centered judge grants justice to a person he cares nothing about, will not the righteous God despite a delay grant justice to his blessed elect? This involves taking the $\kappa\alpha\iota$ at the beginning of the last clause of verse 7 as a concessive, as in the KJV, NKJV, and NJB. It also involves taking $\mu\alpha\kappa\rho\theta\upsilon\mu\acute{\epsilon}\omega$ in that clause in the sense of delay, as in RSV, NRSV, NAU, NJB, and ESV (see, Crump, 83-84). Crump states (p. 85):

The unjust judge initially ignores the widow's pleas, procrastinates for a considerable period, and then finally acts only to preserve his public reputation. In this regard, he is unlike our heavenly judge, who always hears our requests and never ignores a disciple's cries even though he too may delay inexplicably. This characteristic of divine slowness follows a long-standing Old Testament tradition in which God's purposes, though

deliberate and assured, often unfold at a tortoiselike pace (at least, it can feel that way to us). The lament psalms are replete with cries of faithful men and women who trust in God's promises but, nevertheless, find their faith stretched to the breaking point by God's apparent lack of interest: [quotes Ps. 42:9-10, 44:23-24, 26]. These are faithful people who continue to pray despite heaven's doors seeming to be tightly shut against them. Eventually, the wicked begin to malign God's character, since by all appearances his inaction is decidedly faithless. . . .

God's frequent reply is that he will eventually act, and when he does it will be both to redeem his people and to vindicate the honor of his name (Ps. 115:1-3; Isa. 52:1-6; 64:1-5; Jer. 14:21; Ezek. 20:41-44; 38:14-39:8; 39:21-29). Nevertheless, his timing is his own and will neither be stretched nor forcibly abbreviated by any considerations other than his own. The great God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob remains forever committed to the honor and glory due his holiness, and when the time is right, he will ensure that every divine action is praised as faithful and just.

The assumed answer is "Of course he will," which answer Jesus spells out in v. 8a saying "I tell you, he will give justice to them [suddenly]." This involves taking the phrase *ἐν τάχει* as meaning "suddenly" rather than the more common meaning "soon," but as Snodgrass observes [2008, 459]: "Luke seems to have 'suddenly' in mind. In 17:26-37 the message is that the coming of the Son of Man will be as it was with Noah and Lot. People were going about their daily routines, and suddenly destruction came." Crump states (p. 87 fn. 15): "The phrase *en tachei* may mean either "quickly, suddenly" (some also suggest "unexpectedly") or "soon, shortly" depending on how *makrothymein* is translated. I opt for the first meaning. The point is not that the Son of Man will return soon after only a short lapse of time, but that when he does return, the events involved will transpire suddenly."

In v. 8b Jesus asks whether when he returns he will find on earth *the* faith, whether he will find people who during his "absence" have not given up on their expectation of vindication and ceased praying as a result. It is a rhetorical question that serves as an exhortation to steadfastness while awaiting his return. Bock comments (1996, 1455-1456): "[T]he context indicates that the Son of Man will be looking for those who are looking for him. In the interim, will believers keep the faith? Will they continue to pray and look for vindication? Even though Jesus expresses the idea as a question, he is exhorting them to keep watching." Crump states (p. 87):

Luke's Jesus warned his disciples, "The time is coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it" (Luke 17:22). Throughout the ages the faithful have cried out, "Maranatha!" Come, Lord. Come! For centuries, the saints have patiently raised their eyes to heaven while enduring the persecutions of Nero and executions under Chairman Mao. Whether living through the brutality of Domitian, Trajan, Lenin, Stalin, Pol Pot, or some unnamed tyrant yet to come, God's faithful people have always set their eyes on Jesus, refusing

to surrender their belief in the value of prayer, the reality of God's answers, or the certainty of their eventual deliverance.