

THE PARABLES OF JESUS

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Introduction

Jesus frequently didn't express himself directly, he often spoke in carefully structured stories that we call parables. The word 'parable' comes from the Greek *parabole* – which means placing things side by side in order to compare them. Of course, these stories or parables would have been easier for the disciples to remember than ordinary teaching, which is probably why we have so many of them recorded in the Gospels. In fact about a third of all Jesus's teachings recorded in the Gospels are expressed in parables.

Not all the parables are long stories, they can be just figurative speech; a simile like Matthew 13:33

“He told them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.”” (Matthew 13:33 NIV)

or a metaphor like Matthew 5:14

““You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden.” (Matthew 5:14 NIV)
So, a parable can be anything from a single line metaphor or simile to a long story.

Some parables are invented and some relate to an existing reality, like the one about yeast we just quoted, others are invented to illustrate a point.

I think Jesus used parables a lot because they are powerful and memorable and Jesus was putting across an important and urgent message – the kingdom of God is at hand. The parables often draw on real life images – like new wine into old wineskins (Matthew 9:17). Often they begin with a question – What do you think?, or Who among you ... ? or just How ... ? , by my count 22 of the parables are like that. Sometimes they end with a question like the parable of the wicked tenants of the vineyard (Matthew 21:40; Mark 12:9).

Jesus used these questions to make his listeners think. Sometimes he made them think in new different ways, but sometimes he's asking for agreement – like the parable of the thief who came in the night (Matthew 24:43):

“But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into.” (Matthew 24:43 NIV)

here Jesus is appealing to his listeners for approval or agreement.

For us today it's sometimes difficult to understand and relate to the agricultural or fishing images that Jesus chose to use. Jesus chose those images because his original listeners were farmers and fishermen. So, in the parable of the sheep and the goats for example (Matthew 25:32-33):

“All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.” (Matthew 25:32-33 NIV)

we need to understand that at a distance sheep and goats looked much alike and it wasn't so easy to distinguish them. In his parables Jesus speaks to people about actual life as they knew it. To truly understand the parables of Jesus we need to familiarise ourselves with the original cultural context in which they were given.

Often parables oppose two opinions – one opinion corresponds to the likely opinion of the listeners, the other to that of Jesus. A good example is that of the workers in the vineyard where all the workers receive the same wages (Matthew 20:1-15). Here the listeners would identify themselves with the workers who started work early in the morning rather than those who started near the end of the day, but the owner of the vineyard explains that he can pay what he wants and the early morning workers got what they had agreed to and asks why they should begrudge his generosity. We find a similar approach in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32).

Jesus' parables often contain an invitation to follow a certain direction; starting from one way of looking at things we're led to another better way. Often Jesus wants to advocate a good line of conduct or to warn against bad conduct. Think, for example, of the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37), the rich fool (Luke 12:16-20), the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) and the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14).

Some parables deal with God's behaviour, although God's behaviour is never described for its own sake. Jesus wants us to draw conclusions from it for our own conduct – for example: “that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:45-48 NIV)

Jesus doesn't deal with the issue of justice here, he's just giving the disciples an example to follow. Similarly Jesus describes the love with which God cares for birds and flowers. Jesus speaks of the conduct of a father towards his son (Matthew 7:9-11), of a friend towards his friend (Luke 11:5-8), of a master towards his servants ((Luke 17:7-10), of a judge towards a widow (Luke 18:2-5) partly to help us understand God's attitude towards us, but always with the intention that we draw from this material the consequences for our behaviour towards God and each other. The parables of Jesus are almost always concerned with the behaviour of his listeners.

A good parable should (i) create distance, (ii) provoke and (iii) appeal.

A good parable creates distance both on a religious level – so as not to conflict with firmly established convictions – and from the circumstances of the moment – so as to give us a completely fresh viewpoint. Jesus creates distance by talking about something which seems to have little connection with the immediate circumstances. So when Jesus started to tell Simon the Pharisee a story about a creditor and two debtors (Luke 7:40-43), Simon must have been surprised.

A good parable provokes to make us think and sharpen our attention – that's why so many parables begin with a question. If a parable is irritating it has provoking power. Parables often shock us, think back to the parable about the labourers in the vineyard who receive as much for one hours work as those who have worked the whole day that we already mentioned. Here our normal current way of thinking and acting is challenged.

A good parable launches an appeal to us to change, to live differently. Take the parable of the good Samaritan for example. Parables don't so much give information as call us to action. Jesus wants to bring us into the new world of his Father so that we too may be as good and merciful as the Father is.

As I've already implied, when we interpret parables, we need to think both about what the parable would have meant in the life of Jesus' original listeners and what it means for our lives today.

Let's now move on to look at some of the more important parables in more detail. As I've already said parables are a major part of Jesus's teaching, so we don't have time to look at anything like all of them this morning – so please excuse me if I don't cover your favourite parable.

The Parable of the Sower and the Soils

This is recorded in all three synoptic gospels - in Luke's gospel chapter 8, in Mark chapter 4 and in Matthew chapter 13. I'm mainly going to look at Mark and Luke as Matthew's account is quite similar to Mark's.

Let's start by looking at the text from Luke's gospel:

“After this, Jesus travelled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means. While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown." When he said this, he called out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."” (Luke 8:1-8 NIV)

Both Mark and Luke make it clear that Jesus was addressing a crowd. Luke makes it clear that Jesus had other followers in addition to the 12 disciples. This is Luke's first mention of the disciples since they were called. I think this indicates that some of the people Jesus healed stayed with him forming a kind of community around him. Having these single women (they were almost certainly single or widows otherwise they probably wouldn't have had resources to dispose of) travelling around with a band of men would have been regarded as scandalous. It's interesting that in Luke's gospel Jesus apparently told AND explained this parable to a large crowd, not just his disciples whereas in Mark's gospel Jesus explains to the disciples alone - I think this latter is more likely, although the crowd were probably still around.

Mark's comments in verses 11 and 12 have given rise to much controversy:

“He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!"” (Mark 4:11-12 NIV)

but I think that they just mean that the nature of the kingdom of God will not become clear and be explained to those who (like the crowds) have not become believers and have not been called according to God's sovereign purposes.

According to the account in Mark's gospel this parable is of fundamental importance in understanding Jesus' teaching, Jesus says that failure to understand *this* parable will mean a failure to understand *all* parables. The parable has first position in Mark's gospel, but Luke squeezes it in. I know this parable of Jesus is usually called the Parable of the Sower, but I think that's misleading, because this story is really all about the different soil conditions that seed can be sown into and what happens to the seed as a result. There's nothing to indicate that the sower did anything different with the different batches of seed, or that anything was wrong with any of the seed, rather it was the different conditions which that seed encountered that were the determining factor. That's why I've called it the "Parable of the Sower and the Soils. Although, of course, Jesus has an important role here as the sower of the gospel and like the sower in the parable we have to sow the seed of the gospel everywhere, even on unpromising ground.

As we shall see the theme of this parable is about the authentic hearing and receiving of God's word:

"He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Luke 8:8);
"so that ... though hearing they may not understand" (Luke 8:10);
"those who hear" (in various forms, Luke 8:12, 13, 14, 15);
"consider carefully how you listen" (Luke 8:18); and
"those who hear God's word" (Luke 8:21).

In those days the farmer would sow his seed by what is called the broadcast method. He would carry the seed in a pouch at his side and as he walked through the tilled field he would toss it out onto the ground, scattering it liberally. It was then usually ploughed into the ground, but the parable doesn't mention that because it's not really relevant to the meaning of the story. In Jesus' parable the seed encounters different kinds of soil conditions: a path which would have been hard soil, rocky soil, a thorn patch and good soil. What happens to the seed is different in each of those four places.

When I was re-reading this parable to prepare for this morning I was reminded of a story that a colleague told me about "sowing" or investing his money in four different investment funds some years ago. Last December he went to see the fund manager to get a report on what had happened to his investments. "Well" the fund manager said to him, "there's good news and bad news". You'll remember that we invested a quarter of your money into a bank based fund – well it was always a solid performer in the past, but with the financial crisis times have been very hard for banks and so that investment is entirely gone. You'll also remember that we invested another quarter of your money into an alternative energy project making bio fuels, well that initially showed very strong returns, but I'm afraid that with the collapse in oil prices and the increases in the costs of grain and other raw materials they used the company became unprofitable and went bankrupt. Next we invested the third quarter of your money in mortgage backed securities, but people were greedy and bought houses they couldn't afford and so I'm afraid that they have become worthless. So what's the good news shouted my colleague. Well smiled the fund manager, we invested the last quarter of your money as venture capital into a start up company and they are doing incredibly well and I'm sure that with a little patience that investment will pay off fifty or even a hundred times over.

I'm sure you can see that my story loosely follows Jesus' parable, but let's go back to the original story.

Jesus teaches a large crowd by means of this parable – look at verse 4:

“While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable:” (Luke 8:4)

The parable likens the evangelistic teaching of Jesus to a Farmer sowing seed.

In verse 11 Jesus tells us that the seed in the parable represents the word of God:

“This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God.”

and in verses 12 to 15 He tells us that the different kinds of soils represent different reactions of people each hearing God’s word.

According to Jesus the first kind of soil was hard soil – look at verse 5:

“A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up.”

Jesus explains this in verse 12:

“Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.”

So the parable is all about hearing – genuine hearing or superficial hearing. We’re all here today, so we’ve heard at least some of God’s word – I hope –, but do we really believe it. We’ve received the seed – but what’s happened to it in our lives? Has it really entered into our hearts and minds or are we hardened and closed to it, so that it never really gets a chance to germinate. This often happens if we’ve had a bad experience, an unmet expectation or a hurt, especially a really deep hurt. Those things can create a hardness in us so that we don’t let God’s word through. We all suffer pain and hurts – some of us more so than others. If you are hurting today, I’m really sorry, but don’t run from God, run to God – He’s the only one who can heal you and make you whole. Give your hurt to God and get better not bitter. A bitter life is a barren and wasted life, bitterness only prolongs and amplifies the pain.

This hardness and closed-ness to God can also be caused by pride when we think we can do it by ourselves, we think we don’t need any help from God. If we’re filled with pride this morning, let’s remember the old adage that pride comes before a fall and repent and turn to God before it’s too late. Hardness can also be caused by fear, perhaps a fear of what God might say to us or demand of us, but he will faithfully forgive us our sins if we turn to him in repentance and won’t demand of us more than we are able to give. If he does ask to do something in his service he’ll be with us every step of the way strengthening and supporting us.

So if your heart and mind have been closed to God, drop your defences, open your mind and let God speak to you. Don’t let the birds eat your seed. The seed of God’s word will bring you healing. As it says in verse 12, belief in this word will also bring you God’s salvation – eternal life with him.

Jesus said that the second kind of soil was rocky – look at verse 6:

“Some fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture.”

In the Middle East a lot of soil is very shallow with limestone rock only a few inches below the surface, so plants trying to grow in that soil can’t develop enough of a root system to support them, when the sun comes they wither.

Jesus explains the application of this in verse 13:

“Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away.”

Some of us are like that. When we first hear God's word we receive it eagerly, but we don't develop our relationship with God, we don't root ourselves deeply in his word – the Bible. So when problems come we turn away from God and our faith dies. There are many who initially receive the word, but a year later there's no perceptible change in them, or their lives, and when problems come, when the heat is on, they fall away. If you've heard God's word but haven't put it into practice then most likely your faith will not last. You need to spend time each day with your Bible, to spend time each day in prayer. You need to spend time in fellowship with other Christians, perhaps in a home group. In summary you need commitment to God, his people and his word to develop your Christian roots.

The third kind of conditions the seed found was a patch of thorns – see verse 7:

“Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants.”

This is explained in verse 14:

“The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.”

With people like that the seed lands and starts to grow. This growth lasts longer than that on rocky soil, but it doesn't bear fruit because it gets choked by what Jesus called “thorns”. He names these in verse 14 – worries, riches and pleasures. These things distract us and preoccupy our minds. But, you know riches and pleasures don't bring any lasting satisfaction – I see more unhappy people in Monaco, where material wealth abounds, than amongst the Tonga tribe in Zimbabwe, who are starving from lack of food and suffering political repression. Only God can fill the void within us and only in surrender to him and allowing him to show us the purpose he has for our lives will we find peace and freedom. But, we can't find God's purpose for us and our lives by watching TV or movies or playing sport. We've got to spend time with our Bible and in prayer. That doesn't mean that pleasures and the good things of this world have no place in our lives. God gave us all the good things of this world to enjoy. After all God gave us the ability to have fun and experience pleasure in the first place. But, God wants us to enjoy all these things in the way he intended – drink wine, but don't get drunk AND we must not let anyone or anything come before God in our lives. God won't accept our leftovers.

Those who are still listening carefully, may have noticed that I haven't mentioned worries yet. I believe it's no accident that Jesus put them first in his list. They can be the worst distraction. Fear can paralyse us. God doesn't want us to be afraid he wants us to trust in him to deal with our fears and worries. As John says in his first letter “perfect love casts out fear”.

These thorns that choke our faith are mainly a result of neglect in our lives – neglecting to spend time with God regularly, neglecting to read our Bible regularly and neglecting fellowship with our Christian brothers. That kind of neglect will allow the thorns to grow up all around us which will initially choke the spiritual joy out of us and finally kill off our faith entirely.

The remainder of the seed fell on good soil – see verse 8:

“Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.” When he said this, he called out, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

Which Jesus explained in verse 15:

“But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.”

A 100 fold yield would have been incredibly good for a farmer in Palestine, so this is an indication of how great the blessing from hearing and receiving God's word really is. So these people not only hear the word of God but they retain it. They think about it and study it. They put it into practice and persevere with it. The result is a productive life and a productive life is generally happy and satisfying. What distinguishes these people from the others is not really the lack of problems, but that they yield a crop – they bear fruit.

If we want to make our lives really count, if we want our lives to be productive and fulfilled, then we must study God's word and spend time with him in prayer. As Jesus said in verse 8 of our reading - "He who has ears to hear, let him hear". We need an authentic and appropriate hearing of God's word which leads to a real and lasting faith. And we mustn't just be hearers of God's word, we must act on it, do something about it and let it make a real difference in our lives.

But don't be impatient. Remember that Jesus used an agricultural analogy, remember the kinds of words he uses 'mature' in verse 14, 'persevere' in verse 15. So we need to give our spiritual development time, it takes time for people as well as plants to grow and mature. That's a difficult concept in our society which demands instant gratification – but real satisfaction and real development take time. We demand an instant miracle – and God CAN do that, but it's not the way he usually works. He wants to test us, to develop our strengths and root out our weaknesses.

The question Jesus really wants us to ask ourselves is what kind of soil is in our lives? The evidence of that is in our fruit. Are we growing in our faith, is God changing us slowly from the inside, are we beginning to experience the lasting peace and joy that only he brings? If not we need to change our spiritual soil. The parable never blames the sower or the seed, it's the soil – our attitudes – which cause the difficulties.

We need to change our mental attitudes, the priorities in our lives and turn to Jesus, the only one who can heal us and make us whole and mature us to bear much fruit. That fruit can of course be many or all of the fruits of the spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control (Galatians 5:22), but at this point in our Christian lives we need to put ourselves in the place of the sower and start to cast the seeds of God's word into the fields of untouched souls all around us. Remember that verse 4 says that the sower sowed *his* seed, not someone else's. God will give each one of us our seed to sow. We shouldn't necessarily try and copy what others are doing, we just need to follow God's leading. Maybe we'll sow seeds into the lives of others which will grow and blossom and be multiplied a 100 times or even more.

The Parable of the Weeds

This parable is recorded in Matthew chapter 13 - Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, 49-50

This parable comes after the parable of the sower and its interpretation. The first parable deals with bringing people into the kingdom, this second parable deals with the growth and development of the kingdom.

"Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed ears, then the weeds also

appeared. "The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?' " "An enemy did this,' he replied. "The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' " "No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'"" (Matthew 13:24-30 NIV)

It's interesting that Matthew says "set before" rather than "told" – in verse 24 (the NIV translation of *paratithēmi*, as told is poor). This word is usually used for serving a meal – so Jesus is saying he's giving them a banquet to nourish them. But, he's not spoon feeding them – they have to work out the meaning. Interestingly enough, the problem in the first parable was *not* the seed, here the problem *is* the seed. Also interestingly the Greek for seed *sperma* can also mean people – so God initially sowed good people.

This farmer, unlike the farmer in the 'sower' parable, is a landowner with slaves. The weeds (*zizania*) are more specifically darnel (*Lolium temulentum*), a weed related to rye-grass which in the early stages of growth resembles wheat though with narrower leaves, but which produces a smaller ear. Its grains are poisonous, so that to have it mixed in with wheat renders the crop commercially useless as well as potentially harmful. Because of its similar growth the darnel infestation would not be readily apparent until the plants begin to form ears (hence the weeds "becoming visible" at the time when the wheat "produced a crop," v. 26), and by that time it is too late to eradicate the darnel without damaging the wheat with which its roots are intertwined.

The only solution is to undertake the painstaking job of separating out the cut stalks. "Burn up" (*katakaiō*) is generally used of deliberate destruction, and so probably indicates incineration as rubbish, though dried vegetation might also be used for domestic fuel.

The idea of gathering wheat into the barn is a symbol of ultimate salvation (see Matthew 3:12). In real life the slaves and the harvesters would no doubt have been the same people (though extra harvesters might be needed, 9:37–38), but separate terms are used in the story because, while the slaves are not identified in vv. 37–39, if they have a specific symbolic identity it is presumably as Jesus' disciples, whereas the reapers represent angels.

Verses 36-39 are an item by item explanation of the equivalences in the first part of the parable. Verses 40-43 are a more discursive account of the meaning of the harvest which is the culmination of the parable.

"Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field." He answered, "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. "As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear." (Matthew 13:36-43 NIV)

People are divided into two categories at the final judgement – the lost and the saved. In the meantime we need to avoid imposing a premature separation and wait with patience.

I think this parable has a much wider explanation than many of Matthew's parables. Often he's looking at a mixed community within the church: see for instance the recruitment of “bad as well as good” guests to the wedding feast (in Matthew 22:10), with the result that one of the new invitees had subsequently to be thrown out (Matthew 22:11–13). The wicked will be picked out “from among the righteous” (Matthew 13:49). There are false prophets who are wolves dressed up as sheep (Matthew 7:15–20); there are those who call Jesus “Lord, Lord” with apparent sincerity, but who do not belong to him (Matthew 7:21–23); there are foolish as well as wise bridesmaids, waiting and sleeping together until the bridegroom arrives (Matthew 25:1–12); there is a son who sounds more loyal than his brother, but who ultimately fails to deliver (Matthew 21:28–32).

Here I think Matthew is looking with a wider perspective at the whole world. Within “the world” believers and unbelievers continue to exist side by side even after the proclamation of the kingdom of heaven and Jesus’ assault on the kingdom of Satan, and some disciples may have found this apparently unchanged situation perplexing. Where was the new world order they had been promised? What sort of “kingdom” was this that allowed opposition to continue unchecked? Why did God not straightaway destroy the “sons of darkness” and so make his world a place fit for the “sons of light” (to use the language of Qumran)? The parable answers that question by a call to patience, directing attention away from the current situation to the coming judgment, when it will be made plain who are the true people of God and who are the “children of the Evil One.” God is not in a hurry, and they must be prepared to wait for his time.

So the explanation given in these verses rightly focuses not on the present unsatisfactory situation but on the judgment of “the world” at the end of the age, when the wicked will be destroyed and the righteous will “shine out” for all to see. Verses 37–43 (together with the parallel explanation in vv. 49–50):

“This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matthew 13:49-50 NIV)

provide us with one of the most explicit accounts of final judgment and of the ultimate fates of the bad and the good which we find in the gospels. In Matthew 25:31–46 (the parable of the sheep and the goats) it is spelled out in more detail, with the attention focused there on the basis of judgment, but with the same essential division into “good and bad,” with the former finding eternal life and the latter eternal punishment (again envisaged as “fire”).

The “one like a son of man” in Dan 7:13–14 was a figure of universal authority and sovereignty, and it is in accordance with that vision, and its context of judgment (Dan 7:10, 22), that the Son of Man is here presented (as he will be also in 19:28 and in 25:31–46) as executing the final judgment (sending out *his* angels) and thus standing in the place of the divine judge himself.

In verses 49-50 the focus is totally on the destiny of the wicked. There can be no separate existence for the people of God until the final judgement. Until then we will always have the wicked amongst us.

The Wedding Feast or The Great Banquet

This is recorded both by Matthew and Luke (Matthew 22:1-14 and Luke 14:15-24), but I'm mainly going to deal with Luke's version.

"When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God." Jesus replied: "A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.' "But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.' "Another said, 'I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.' "Still another said, 'I have just got married, so I can't come.' "The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.' "'Sir,' the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.' "Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.'"" (Luke 14:15-24 NIV)

The Parable in Luke occurs within the context of table talk at the house of a Pharisee. Only Luke records Jesus' meals with the Pharisees, which generally seem to be a setting for anti-Pharisaic speeches. As the opening question makes clear, the banquet actually represents the kingdom of heaven.

The parable follows two other parables which have a similar structure – Luke 14:7-11 and 12-14.

The words of the anonymous guest in verse 15 take up the pronouncement of Jesus just before – "but when you give a feast invite the poor and you will be blessed". Salvation is being described in terms of a great banquet given by God for all the peoples. The opening question is really a challenge to Jesus to express his views on the Messianic banquet, but instead Jesus tells a parable which expresses very different views on this topic from those held by the Pharisees.

In verses 16-17 the invitation has been extended and accepted already (as was the custom in those times). The guests were reminded at the last minute by a servant specifically sent for the purpose, in Matthew's version a group of servants are sent.

In verses 18-20 the guests make excuses, although it's really too late the food is already prepared. In Eastern culture to make a field more important than your host is to completely break the relationship, that's how rude those invitees were being. Also the excuse is ridiculous, in Palestine no one would buy a field without having inspected it very carefully. The other excuses offered are equally feeble.

In summary, all of those invited are so entangled by their relationships that they can't hear the call. We're often like that aren't we. We get so entangled in secular activities that we've got no time to hear God's call on our lives.

In v21 the servant reports the refusals and the master – God – is angry. They should have been prepared to give up their mundane activities to attend his banquet. Here, God's anger is

a reaction against the rejection of Jesus by God's chosen people Israel, who were invited to the banquet. So the people who were excluded from the Temple are invited to the banquet, they're being invited into God's kingdom.

In v22-23 the Gentiles are called – it's like Isaiah's pronouncements (Isaiah 29:18-19; 35:5-6; 56:1-9; 61:1). Luke isn't really thinking of using force here, but in Middle Eastern culture you needed to show someone that you really wanted them to accept your invitation. Also a poor man would find it very hard to believe he was really wanted in the house of a nobleman.

In Matthew's version of the parable the king's servants (the prophets) were treated shamefully by Israel. Matthew is prophesying the destruction of Jerusalem.

The king excludes those who don't have the wedding garment – which was a white robe. We need to be clad in the clean white robe of justification through the blood of Jesus.

Presumably both kinds of people – rich and poor – were in the original audience. The former knew they would be invited and expected to go, but Jesus portrays such people as declining. As Jesus said elsewhere, it's harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. The poor could only be invited to such a banquet in their dreams – only in fairy tales, or the kingdom of God, do beggars sit at the king's table.

It's surprising that the parable doesn't really have an ending. The rich are excluded by their own choice and the poor counted in, but there is no application. What matters is that the invitation was not heeded, the rich brought judgment on themselves – we need to hear that message and accept Christ in faith thus taking up God's gracious invitation. God's grace, is extended to the poor. They did not expect an invitation, so they are not inclined to reject it. On the other hand, the rich did not grasp the gravity of their position, we must understand the gravity of our position. If we don't accept the forgiveness Christ bought for us on the cross, we'll be excluded from the banquet. We'll be excluded from the kingdom of heaven.

The Prodigal Son or the Lost Son

The whole of chapter 15 is a unity, so before we start on the parable of the prodigal son we're also going to read the first 11 verses:

“Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering round to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them." Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons." (Luke 15:1-11 NIV)

The first two verses set the tone for the chapter – an indictment of the Jewish authorities, the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. Jesus treats unacceptable people like tax collectors as if

they were acceptable friends and the Jewish authorities can't understand or accept that. These first two parables show how we rejoice at the recovery of what is lost, how God rejoices at the saving of a lost soul – but as we're about to see a son is more important than lost sheep or lost coins.

The basic message of the whole of chapter 15 is the same. Firstly we have a shepherd finding a lost sheep. The calling of a shepherd was despised by the Pharisees and in Jewish Law a shepherd couldn't even testify in court, although the OT honoured that calling saying that God would feed his flock like a shepherd (Isaiah 40:11). Ezekiel said that God would seek out his sheep (Ezekiel 34) and Psalm 23 says the Lord is my shepherd. Here God is being portrayed as a sinful unacceptable shepherd. That would have been hugely shocking to the Pharisees in spite of the OT support for the idea that God acts like a shepherd.

Secondly we have a parable of a woman seeking for a lost coin. Again we have a picture of God the Father seeking out sinners who are lost, although making use of a woman to represent God would have been revolutionary for Jesus's listeners. I think we can see the lamp as either the church (Revelation 1:20; 4:5) or as Jesus, God's light in both cases and God is using these things to find and save the lost. This whole idea of God seeking out sinners would have been amazing for Jesus' listeners, although the OT prophets were continually describing how God called out and reached out to a sinful Israelite nation.

I think the third parable might be misunderstood without the first two, so now let's turn to the parable of the prodigal son – often called the parable of the lost son. Actually the parable deals with two sons and we have to decide which son is lost.

“Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no-one gave him anything. "When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’ So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. "The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ "But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate. "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ "‘My son,’ the

father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"" (Luke 15:11-32 NIV)

According to Jewish Law the elder son would receive 2/3 and the younger son 1/3 of the estate on the Father's death. The younger son doesn't ask for his inheritance, but he does ask for a division of the property. The Father divided his living, his *bios*, between them. Jewish Law was against the giving away of property during one's lifetime (Sirach 33:19-23). The younger son has struck a serious blow against the family by asking for this. In fact a simple division of the property wouldn't have given the younger son the right to dispose of his share, he'd normally have received only a right to the income from that part of the estate, but here he seems to have received a complete disposition of his share of the underlying property. He had no right to this until the Father was dead and would not normally have received it earlier – so he's treating his father as if he were dead.

The younger son then quickly turns his share of the property into cash, which would probably have involved him taking much less than it was worth, and travelled away from his people to a distant land. The younger son was really after freedom from the law of the father, but he misuses that freedom to squander his inheritance.

Then there was a famine and the younger son was in need. Famines were frequent in Jesus's time and this would have been a powerful image for his listeners. The younger son then 'forced himself on a citizen of that far country' (the parable never says he 'applied for a job') and is given a task he's expected to refuse – looking after pigs which were unclean animals to the Jews.

When he's sufficiently low he comes to his senses – there's a Jewish saying 'When a son in need in a strange land goes barefoot, then he remembers the comfort of his father's house.' Although the word for repentance *metanoiein* isn't used, his planned confession to his father shows that he is repentant.

The son at once returned to his father – the text doesn't say he returned to his home or to his village – the father sees him whilst he's still far away and saves him whilst he is still hopelessly lost. The sole reason for that is the father's compassion and grace – the son has, as yet, made no appeal to the father. The son's salvation comes from the father solely by grace. The father stops the son's confession part way through – before he can say 'make me like one of your hired men'. It's amazing that the father runs to the son – men of standing never ever ran (Sirach 19:30 'a man's manner of walking shows what he is') – but here the father forgets his dignity. The father's kisses are a sign of reconciliation and forgiveness.

The father then turns to his household staff and orders them to honour his son – it's like Isaiah 61:10 'for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness'. The son is completely re-integrated into the family. This shows how God the father will welcome repentant sinners who are clothed in Christ's righteousness.

Incidentally there is a very similar story in Buddhist literature, but there the returning boy has to earn his acceptance by working for the father for many years to pay off his guilt. What a contrast with the Christian message of salvation by grace and not works.

Returning to our parable, the father then orders the killing of the fatted calf, an animal reserved for special occasions, in a celebration for the whole community designed to reconcile the son back to the whole community. Both extremities of the prodigal son's situation are represented by eating imagery. He was hungry in a foreign land, now the fatted calf is killed for him on his return.

The idea that the younger son was dead and now is alive again, indicates that the father had considered him as dead when he left the family. There might even have been a formal ceremony to pronounce him dead, which would have been in accordance with Jewish custom. In any event this speaks loudly to us about our own salvation. The wages of sin are death. Before we accept Christ and return to the Father we are dead in our sins, but once we do turn to Christ we are alive again.

The attitude of the elder brother to this situation is in sharp contrast to that of the father. As the elder son approaches – a parallel to the home-coming of the younger son – he calls one of the young servants (who wouldn't have been invited to the feast which was only for adults) who tells him what has happened. By declining to attend the elder brother refuses to fulfil his role. Instead he publicly humiliates the father and seriously insults him by quarrelling whilst guests are present. This is a very serious breach of relations.

The father leaves the banquet and goes out to meet the elder brother, just as he had earlier gone out to meet the younger son. The elder son doesn't react favourably to the father's love, instead he complains. He's portraying the father as an employer or master and not as a father – he's rejecting his family relationships with both his father and his brother. He accuses the father of favouritism. The elder son justifies himself on the basis of his performance and ignores the issue of repentance and grace – he's in a merit reward relationship. He won't accept his younger brother because he hasn't 'earned' his sonship. To underline his anger he calls his brother 'this son of yours'.

It's interesting that the elder son has apparently not been too close to the father whilst the younger son was away (he talks about celebrating with his friends, not about celebrating with family and friends) and now he rejects both his father and his brother. The younger son was willing to be a hired hand, but now the elder son seems to be rejecting the family entirely.

The father had left the banquet to plead with the elder son, but he insists that the elder son must bend to his will in joining the celebration.

The father tells the elder son that his rights are not affected by the grace shown to the younger brother. The father tells the elder son he already has everything.

The younger son had to have the experience of losing everything in order to find himself again. The father gives to the younger son to offer him liberation as a son; he takes from the elder brother in order to offer him liberation as a brother. The parable asserts the unity of the father with the elder son just as much as with the younger son. Neither son is permitted to score over the other. We don't know how the sons, especially the elder son, finally responded because the parable doesn't tell us.

In Jesus' ministry the scribes and Pharisees are like the elder son, the tax collectors and sinners are like the younger son. Jesus presents these parables, especially the third parable we've just looked at, as an indictment of the Jewish authorities.

In the three parables Jesus expounds the concepts of lost and found. Man is miserable when he's lost but God takes joy in finding him. When the sinner finds his way to God, God meets him with the gift of the spirit and Jesus mediates the critical encounter. It's only when the younger son acknowledges his stupidity and error that he is able to return to the Father. It's not that the Father doesn't want him to return, but he can't until he acknowledges his error, his sinfulness. We can't find salvation unless and until we acknowledge our sinfulness and turn back to God.

In the parable Jesus leaves us with the open question as to whether the Pharisees and Jewish leaders will join repentant sinners at the table of the king (the father) – or will they exclude themselves from God's family.

The parables of Luke chapter 15, especially the third parable of the prodigal son, are really a commentary of Jesus's statement:

"I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." (Luke 5:32 NIV)

Both the parable and the invitation are open. We don't know what the elder brother did, but what about we sinners – will we accept God's invitation, his call to be reconciled to him, or not.

The Parable of the Shrewd Manager

This is often called the parable of the unjust or dishonest steward, but I prefer the title I've used. Luke makes it clear that this is a new narrative session by saying "Jesus told the disciples". Jesus has completed his formal response to the Pharisees that we saw when we were looking at the parable of the prodigal son in chapter 15.

This is said to be one of the most difficult parables to interpret, but I don't think it's really all that difficult. I believe Jesus is looking at the appropriate use of wealth here.

"Jesus told his disciples: "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.' "The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg— I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.' "So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' "'Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied. "The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.' "Then he asked the second, 'And how much do you owe?' "'A thousand bushels of wheat,' he replied. "He told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred.' "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings." (Luke 16:1-9 NIV)

In verses 1-2 the master obviously thought that the charge against his manager was justified since he moves to dismiss him. It would obviously have been easy for a manager able to sign contracts for his master to waste or misappropriate his possessions. He instructs the manager to prepare a final accounting. It's amazing that the manager doesn't plead with his master or

even protest his innocence. He must have believed that there was clear evidence of his guilt and that his master would have no sympathy.

Verses 3-4 the manager has time to think of a plan of action – he's facing the loss of his livelihood. He can't dig and doesn't want to beg so he has an inspiration. He sees a way of being kept by his masters debtors. I believe that when he talks of being received into peoples houses, he's talking about being received long term, he's looking for a new job.

The manager deals with the debtors one by one, look at verses 5-7. Secrecy is essential. The first owes (in the Greek) 100 measures of olive oil. Josephus tells us that the measure *batos* (used only here in the NT) was about 8.75 gallons – so he owed 875 gallons. Jeremias says it's about 800 gallons. Anyway it was a lot of oil and the manager tells the man to write out a new bill for half as much – 50 measures. A second example is given, a debtor is allowed to replace a bill for 100 measures of wheat with a bill for 80 measures. The measure here is about 10 bushels – so the bill was originally for 1,000 bushels of wheat. The manager is dealing with very large quantities. You can see the manager varies his rate of discount between oil and wheat. This was because it was relatively easy to adulterate oil and cheat, but much harder with wheat. So the charge for borrowing oil was much higher than the charge for borrowing wheat. Presumably the manager continued the process with other debtors, these two are just examples.

Now we need to look at why the master commended his manager.

The usual explanation of the parable is that the steward is commended, not for his dishonesty, but for taking resolute action in a crisis. The coming of Jesus forced people to a point of decision. When even dishonest worldly people know how and when to take decisive action, how much more should those who follow him. It is the astuteness of the steward which is commended, not his commercial practices. T. W. Manson reminds us that there is a world of difference between 'I applaud the dishonest steward because he acted cleverly' and 'I applaud the clever steward because he acted dishonestly'. But I don't think that this is the way we should understand the parable. This view is often held in conjunction with the idea that Luke has appended applications to the use of money which Jesus did not originally teach. Some think that the steward was entitled to commissions and that the rewriting of the bonds was the forgoing of this money in the hope of getting something more. But this doesn't really do justice to the fact that the steward was dishonest.

As is usually the case I think the key to understanding the parable lies in understand the cultural and commercial background of these times.

Jews were forbidden to take interest from fellow-Jews when they lent them money (Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:36; Deuteronomy 23:19). Those who wished to make money from loans evaded this by reasoning that the law was concerned to prohibit the exploitation of the poor. It was not meant to forbid innocent transactions that were mutually beneficial and where the payment of interest amounted to the sharing of profits. If anyone had even a little of a given commodity he was not destitute and thus lending to him was not exploitation. As almost everyone had a little oil and a little wheat, the way was open for widespread use of a legal fiction. Whatever was borrowed was given a value in oil or wheat (say, eighty measures of wheat), the interest added on (say, twenty measures), and the bond made out for the repayment of the total in terms of oil or wheat (in this case one hundred measures). The transaction was usurious, but the bond gave no indication of this. Commonly such

transactions were carried out by stewards, ostensibly without the owner's knowledge. Understood in this way, the parable presents us with a steward who, faced with the loss of his employment, protected his future by calling in the bonds and getting the debtors to rewrite them so that they no longer carried interest. He looked to their gratitude to express itself by their taking him into their homes. His action put the owner in a difficult position. He would have the greatest of difficulty in establishing his claim to the original amounts now that the first bonds were destroyed. In any case he could not repudiate the steward's action without convicting himself of taking usury. It would be extremely difficult to obtain his legal rights and in the process he would convict himself of acting impiously. So he put the best face possible on the situation and 'commended' the steward, thus securing an undeserved reputation for piety. The steward was now seen as conforming to the law of God and the owner as applauding this. Both were acting decisively in a difficult situation.

That the steward is called *dishonest* may be the master's protest against the way he had been deprived of his money in these transactions, or it may indicate his conviction that the steward had been dishonest from the beginning – although I think the latter is more likely. I'm sure this is a question of usurious contracts, but if not, we must feel that the master appreciated the fact that he had been outwitted by a smart rogue and paid his tribute to the wisdom, though not the morality, of the act. He did not say that he was pleased. He simply admired the astuteness of the steward while doubtless deploring its effect on himself. The worldly-minded (*sons of this world*) are wise by their own lights. As Moffatt says, 'the children of this world look further ahead, in dealing with their own generation, than the children of Light.' The *sons of light* are the servants of God. Well-intentioned as they are, they often lack the wisdom to use what they have as wisely as the worldly use their possessions for their very different ends.

Jesus adds some comments in verse 9. Jesus adds the instruction to use worldly wealth or *unrighteous mammon* wisely. *Mammon* is our transliteration of an Aramaic expression, of uncertain derivation, which is used to denote money or wealth generally. The adjective worldly or unrighteous reminds us that all too often this is acquired in unworthy ways. Jewish writings do contain a contrast between 'false mammon' and 'true mammon', which indicates that possessions might be acquired honestly or the reverse. Jesus's use of the term may imply that there is commonly some element of unrighteousness in the way people acquire possessions. Jesus's followers must use their money for their spiritual purposes just as wisely as the children of this world do for their material aims. As our goal is 'treasure in heaven', we should use money for purposes such as giving to the poor. This will gain us friends and it will stand us in good stead when money *fails*, i.e. when we die and money is of no more use. The meaning of *they may receive you into the eternal habitations* (cf. John 14:2) may be that the friends thus made will welcome us in heaven. More probably we have a common Jewish use of the plural to mean 'God' in accordance with a tendency to avoid use of the divine name. It is God who receives people into heaven.

In verses 10-13 Jesus uses money as a means of teaching that discipleship must be wholehearted. If we use money in the wrong way then we can't be trusted with more important things. The money we think we own is not really ours. It is always what we have from God (1 Chronicles 29:14) and we are no more than stewards of it. We cannot take it with us when we die. If we handle it badly we show that we are unfitted to use the true heavenly riches which will otherwise be given us as our permanent possession (cf. Matthew 25:34).

We can devote ourselves to the service of money or the service of God, but not both (Matthew 6:24).

The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus

““There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. "The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’ "But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’ "He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father’s house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’ "Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’ "‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ "He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”” (Luke 16:19-31 NIV)

This is a marked contrast with the parable of the shrewd manager. It also challenges us about the attitude of the elder son in the parable of the prodigal steward. We should repent and then use money to help others. The alternative is to use our money in such a way as to secure eternal condemnation. We can see Jesus’s words just a few verses earlier as an introduction to the parable:

““No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”” (Luke 16:13 NIV)

In reality everything we have belongs to God and we are merely to be faithful stewards of material possessions. Luke follows the above comments of Jesus by saying that the Pharisees were sneering because they loved money (Luke 16:14), again Jesus is condemning the Pharisees in this parable. It’s really the third parable of a trilogy. In the parable of the Prodigal Son the prodigal wastes his father’s possessions, in the parable of the Shrewd Manager the manager wastes his masters possessions and now in this third parable the rich man wastes his own possessions. They’re all telling us to focus on salvation and not on material possessions.

Here, in verse 19, Jesus pictures a rich man. *Purple* was cloth dyed with a very costly dye (obtainable from the shellfish murex). It would be used for the outer garment and the *fine linen* for the undergarment. The combination stands for the ultimate in luxury. *Feasted* (*euphrainomenos*) sounds the note of happiness, for the same verb is used of merriment (in Luke 12:19; 15:23, 32).

Food is mentioned second. Legends concerning King Agrippa II have it that, on a daily basis, he hosted a meal of banquet proportions; this is precisely the picture Jesus paints of this wealthy man. In the story of the prodigal son, a feast is used to signal a special occasion, with a calf killed in order to feed as many as a hundred guests. Here Jesus says that this was *daily*

fare for this wealthy man, and that in an economy where even the rich could afford to kill a calf only occasionally.

Third, mention is made of their respective places of abode. The wealthy man has a gate, signifying his possession of an estate or house compound appropriate to his station, indeed the word used for gate denotes a large gate like a city or palace. The house was a grand one. Lazarus has no home, but has been placed at the wealthy man's gate, probably by family or friends who would have carried him there every day. The fact that Lazarus has been placed at the gate probably mark Lazarus as a cripple (cf. Matthew 8:6, 14; 9:2; Revelations 2:22), a condition that would help to explain his tragic circumstances. His name means 'God has helped' or 'the one whom God helps' which may be significant, certainly he wasn't helped by man. It's interesting that he's the only character given a name in Jesus's parables. Sometimes the rich man is called 'Dives', but this is simply the Latin for 'rich man'.

The rich man had all he asked in life and lived a life of enjoyable ease. He is not said to have committed any grave sin, but he lived only for himself. That was his condemnation. Lazarus on the other hand was sick, hungry and covered with sores – but he was also suffering mentally. Every day he was within earshot of the daily sumptuous banquets of the rich man whilst he lay there hungry and in pain. Only the dogs paid any attention to him – I don't think they were tormenting him, I think they were trying to help him. Indeed wounds licked by dogs do heal more rapidly. Lazarus appears to have been a kind gentle soul trying to live in harmony with the world around him regardless of the harsh conditions he found himself in.

Now both men die, see verse 22. It's doubtful that Lazarus had a burial, which was an important essential for a Jew, but the rich man was duly buried as we see from verse 23. Nothing has been said about the religious state of either. But Lazarus was evidently a faithful servant of God, for when he died the angels took him to *Abraham's bosom*. The expression is not common, but it could denote that Abraham threw a party for him and he reclined next to Abraham at table – rather like John reclining next to Jesus at the last supper. Some see in it the relationship of child to parent (cf. John 1:18), but it is better to see a contrast between the table at the opening of the story and Lazarus at table with Abraham. The contrast between Lazarus and the rich man now goes into reverse as there is no corresponding joy for the rich man after his death. Hades isn't hell in Jewish though, it's just a neutral place for the departed (although it's not used for the saved in the NT), but here it seems to be equivalent to the Jewish Hell Gehenna, for the rich man was *in torment*. Not only so, but he was able to see Lazarus and to note his comfortable circumstances.

The rich man now asks Abraham for a favour from Lazarus – apparently he even knew the name of the beggar lying at his gate, but he doesn't even attempt to apologise to him. The rich man doesn't even speak to Lazarus, but addresses his request to Abraham in a deferential way, because he calls him *Father Abraham* and words his request humbly enough, though it is interesting that he who showed no mercy to Lazarus now asks for mercy. There is a note of unconscious arrogance in his attitude to Lazarus, for he assumes that he can have the poor man sent across to do him service. He has not realized that earth's values no longer apply. Lazarus remains calm throughout and doesn't show any anger or even indignation at the way the rich man continues to behave towards him. He's a model of the mercy described by Jesus when he told us to love our enemies and be merciful (Luke 6:35-36).

Abraham gives a reasoned refusal of the request in verses 25 and 26, even though the rich man has insulted his guest Lazarus. Abraham's address, *Son*, is tender, but he points to a

reversal. In life the rich man had had his good things. The adjective *your* is significant. The rich man had had what he chose. He could have spent time with the things of God and delighted in the word of God. He could have helped the poor (Lazarus had been close enough!). For him *good things* had been purple and fine linen, daily merriment and feasting. He had chosen what he wanted and now he must abide by his choice. Lazarus had received *evil things*. In this case there is no 'his'. Lazarus had not been responsible for the evils he had suffered.

Now, Abraham points out, a different set of values operates. The balance is redressed. Justice is done. And there is another factor, the *great chasm ... fixed*. This isn't literal, but it means that in the afterlife there is no passing from one state to the other – you're either in heaven or hell. In fact the Greek implies that this is the purpose and not simply the result of the great chasm. The rich man can know how it is with Lazarus (and vice versa), but there is no crossing the chasm on the part of either. Some Jewish writings speak similarly of a permanent separation in the afterlife, e.g. 1 Enoch, where interestingly the righteous have 'the bright spring of water' (1 Enoch 22:9).

In verses 27-28 the rich man shows some interest in others for the first time in the story, although he still has no interest in the poor; he sticks to his own. He asks that his *five brothers* be warned of what awaits them. They are probably evil also, because the total number of brothers, six, is symbolic of evil. Once again the rich man assumes that Lazarus may be despatched on his errand: his deep-seated sense of superiority remains. He also implies that he had not been treated fairly; if he had really been given all the information he needed, he would have acted differently. In contrast is Lazarus's impressive silence throughout the parable. He neither complains about his hard lot on earth, nor gloats over the rich man after death, nor expresses resentment at the latter's endeavours to have him sent on errands. Throughout he accepts what God sends him.

In verses 29-31, Abraham points to the Scriptures. *Moses*, of course, means 'the writings of Moses', and the combination with *the prophets* points to the whole of Scripture, as in verse 16. The Bible, reasons Abraham, gives the brothers all they need. There is an implication that the rich man's unpleasant situation was due not to his riches (after all, Abraham had been rich), but to his lack of compassion and his neglect of Scripture and its teaching. But the rich man does not agree. He knows how he had reacted to the possession of the Bible. So he says that *if some one goes to them from the dead* things will be different; that will bring them to repentance. Such is the fallacy of worldly people. The parable concludes with Abraham's solemn affirmation that the appearance of one risen from the dead will bring no conviction to those who refuse to accept Scripture. If a man cannot be humane with the Old Testament in his hand and Lazarus on his doorstep, nothing – neither a visitant from the other world nor a revelation of the horrors of Hell – will teach him otherwise. In the context the one risen from the dead must be Lazarus, but Luke's readers would surely have been led to think of Jesus. He rose from the dead. But those, like the Sanhedrin, who refused to see him in the Scriptures and to heed what is written about him refused to be convinced by One risen from the dead.

We now have the advantage of possessing the NT scriptures which tell us about Jesus's life and teaching and his crucifixion for our sake and his resurrection. Let's make sure that we heed what scripture says and turn to Christ in faith before it's too late and we become separated from God by an uncrossable chasm.

The Parable of the Good or Compassionate Samaritan

This is recounted only in Luke's gospel:

"On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" He answered: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'" "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?" In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half-dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'" "Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:25-37 NIV)

It's usually called the parable of the good Samaritan, but along with Joel Green I prefer to call it the parable of the compassionate Samaritan.

As always we need to look at the background to verses 25-37. Apparently a lawyer, a teacher of the law, is breaking in on Jesus' conversation with his disciples. He's bent on confrontation, he wants to *test* Jesus, although he does address Jesus respectfully as 'teacher'. Apparently the lawyer is focussed on works based salvation – he's asking not about a way *of* life, but a way *to* life. The distinction is all important. Actually his question is basically flawed – you can't *do* something to gain an inheritance, an inheritance is not a payment for services rendered. Anyway, Jesus answers a question with a question and replies to the man in his own terms, what is written in the Law how do you read it? Jesus is accepting the authority of the Law, but drawing attention to the fact that the interpretation of the Law is crucial. This reminds us of Jesus' confrontations with the Pharisees over the interpretation of Sabbath Day Law.

The man answers that he must keep two commandments and Jesus agrees, but the lawyer is about to hear how extreme the nature of justification through the law will be. The lawyer takes it as axiomatic that salvation is by and through the Law (Deuteronomy 6:16-25) and replies in terms of the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:5) and attaches the law of neighbour love from Leviticus 19:18. Of course, that's the correct order, you can't love your neighbour unless you're filled with the love of God. This neighbour love is, in Jewish Law, a disposition of the heart to be expressed in tangible behaviours related to the neighbour's honour and possessions. Theoretically we could be justified through the Law (Romans 10:5), but the trouble is no one ever succeeds in doing so, because we can't keep to God's perfect standards. Here Jesus isn't saying that we can be saved by good works, Jesus' stress is on loving and following God with all our heart, soul and strength. In fact this is a repudiation of works based salvation rather than an agreement with it. The expert wanted a set of rules that he could keep and so gain eternal life. Jesus is saying that eternal life isn't a matter of

keeping rules at all. Jesus is saying that to live in love is to live the life of the kingdom of God.

In this lies the barbed point of the story of the good Samaritan. For the thing is impossible. We are so used to thinking of the victim and his rescuer as 'neighbours', that we forget this was Jesus's scandalous twist to the story; he deliberately wove it around the representatives of two groups of people whom his hearers knew to be not good neighbours at all, but inveterate enemies. As well visualize the Ethiopian changing his skin or the leopard his spots, as imagine a Samaritan helping a Jew. But nothing less will do. 'An Irish Republican fell among thieves, and an Ulster Orangeman came and helped him; a white colonialist fell among thieves, and a black freedom fighter came to his aid; that is what God's law requires of you.'

The lawyer was right in one thing, at any rate. Eternal life is something to be inherited. And to receive an inheritance, you have to *be* an heir. No amount of *doing* will make you into one. Keeping the law is a way of life; it is not a way to life. It is only when by God's grace we have become the right sort of people—his people, by the new birth—that we begin to do the right sort of things.

So this parable is Jesus' clarification and explanation of the Law. The lawyer's question in verse 29 is apparently an attempt to exploit a vagueness, a loophole, in Leviticus 19:18 – who is a neighbour? In Jesus' time most people would have felt that this was limited to people dwelling amongst the Israelites – but how far should love reach. The lawyer wants to interpret the law legalistically. The lawyer acknowledges the authority of Deuteronomy and Leviticus, but he wants to exploit any ambiguities. He wants to find the loopholes. He wants to know exactly how he can narrow down the range of people he's got to love. He was not alone. Most Jews of Jesus' day believed that this neighbour love was confined to fellow Israelites and resident aliens in their land who embraced the covenant with Yahweh. Because of Greek imperialism and the Roman occupation, the social context in Jesus' day was fractured and boundaries existed not only between Jew and Gentile, but between various Jewish factions. So how far should love reach?

The lawyer might have been a priest returning from service at the Temple – which would give point to one of the characters in the parable.

Jesus' opening to the parable 'a man' deliberately leaves aside any questions as to his nature. He's the archetypal general human being, the question is going to be who will be a neighbour to him.

It's a story that was completely relevant to the context of those times. As regards location, Jerusalem is in the mountains, 2,500 feet above sea level. Jericho is in the Jordan rift valley, 800 feet below sea level. The road between these cities was about 17 miles long and was notorious for its bandits and travel was perilous. So a man is attacked and beaten on this road. This man is clearly a Jew, although the parable doesn't say so, it's his *need* that's important, not his *nationality* or his *status*. A priest and a Levite, who were probably intended to represent the expert questioning Jesus, pass him by and offer no assistance. A man who is half dead – verse 30 – may well appear to be dead and the priest and the Levite might have feared being made unclean by contact with a corpse, although since they are leaving Jerusalem they can't have had pressing religious duties to perform. Also under Jewish Law, priests had an obligation to bury a neglected corpse of a Jew. The stark reality is

that neither of them is prepared to lift a finger to help this man. As priests and Levites they are used to being evaluated on the basis of their position and ancestry rather than their actions.

Yet in verses 33 to 35 it is a despised Samaritan who has compassion on this Jew and he is not even a Holy man, but a travelling merchant. Actually the Greek word used here for having pity or compassion “*splanchnizomai*”, is very vivid and is often used to speak of God’s compassion for humanity. It speaks of a gut wrenching feeling from the deepest part of who we are.

To understand this parable we need to know something about the background between Jews and Samaritans. Most of the people of the Northern kingdom of Israel, which included the Samaria of Jesus’ day, had been taken into exile by the Assyrians in 722 BC. The Assyrians followed their normal policy over conquered nations and deported many of the Jews living in Israel and replaced them with other people groups from the North and East. Consequently the Samaritans of Jesus’ day were not descended from pure Jewish racial stock as they were the results of intermarriage between the remnant of the Israelites and the imported peoples. These Samaritans worshipped other gods as well as Yahweh, worshipped Yahweh on Mount Gerizim rather than at the Jerusalem Temple, had opposed the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple and opposed the Jews of the Southern Kingdom on other matters. Also, they only recognised the scriptural authority of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible – which they had in any event amended to reflect their own customs.

So the Jews had a number of reasons to dislike the Samaritans and they certainly disliked them intensely. Jews would not normally even speak to Samaritans and many more religious Jews avoided passing through Samaria when travelling from Galilee to Jerusalem. Jews used ‘Samaritan’ as a term of abuse and some of the most religious amongst the Jews wouldn’t even say the word “Samaritan”. I hope you’re beginning to get an idea of why Jesus saying something good about a Samaritan would have been astonishing to his listeners.

So this Samaritan, who did not even really know the Law – remember I said that the Samaritans had amended the Pentateuch – gives expression to its real underlying principles. So Jesus’ story is doubly shocking. It is not a holy man who exemplifies the Law but a travelling merchant – and even more shocking, it’s not a Jew who does this but a hated Samaritan.

The care that the Samaritan provides is not a model of moral obligation but of exaggerated practical love grounded in compassion that risks much more than could ever be required or even hoped for. He stops on the Jericho road to assist someone he does not know in spite of the clear danger of doing so. He gives of his own goods and money, freely, making no arrangements for reciprocation – just as Jesus taught (see Luke 6:32-36). In order to obtain care for this stranger, he enters an inn, itself a dangerous place; and he even enters into an open-ended monetary relationship with the innkeeper. This hated Samaritan models God’s expansive, exaggerated, unmerited, costly love for us all. God had compassion and mercy on us helpless sinners and at enormous cost sent his son, Jesus Christ, to die for our sins. That’s a much more costly compassion than even that which was shown by the Samaritan.

Having told the parable Jesus now asks the expert a question on it, look at verse 36: ““Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”” (Luke 10:36 NIV)

Jesus doesn't ask "who is a neighbour", he asks who *acted as* a neighbour. The expert's original question would have focussed on whether or not the injured man was a neighbour. But, that's not the issue; the parable doesn't give us any grounds to consider that. Jesus' question assumes *everyone* is a neighbour and then presses the point that this should move us to loving action for *anyone* in trouble that we come across.

The expert at least seems to grasp the point of the parable, look at the first part of verse 37: "The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him.""' (Luke 10:37 NIV) the expert can't even bring himself to utter the word "Samaritan", but he does acknowledge that it was both the compassion and the actions of the Samaritan which set him apart from the priest and the Levite. The expert has, in effect, answered his original question himself.

Jesus answers him in the second half of verse 37:

"..... Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."'" (Luke 10:37 NIV)

Jesus has turned the original question on its head. The lawyer had asked who is my neighbour and Jesus has brought this round to 'what kind of a neighbour am I?' Jesus also draws things back to *doing*, practical action, as presumed by the expert's original question "what must I *do*", but the scripture leaves it an open question as to whether the expert actually heeded this. The expert has heard the word, but will he do it? Perhaps you've identified with a part of the expert's question *what must I do to come into eternal life*. I certainly hope so! But, we can't inherit the kingdom of God, we can't earn eternal life, by our actions or our compassion. The expert wanted to do something to earn salvation, but we can't do that. All we actually need to do is to just accept God's compassion and mercy and rely on what Jesus has *already* done for us on the cross and turn to him in faith, acknowledging him as our Lord and Master and accept our salvation as God's gracious free gift.

But you know, even though we can't earn our salvation, exactly the same issue as that faced by the expert faces each one of us this morning. We've heard that everyone is our neighbour and that we should both have compassion on them and allow that compassion to express itself in practical assistance. Compassion feels something, compassion does something, compassion costs something and compassion demonstrates our relationship with God. Don't we see people who need to know Jesus and pass them by? Don't we see people everyday who are hurting emotionally or physically and pass them by. Often like the priest and the Levite, we look but do nothing about it. Also, we need to think not only about the Cote d'Azur and our neighbours here, we need to think about what we can do to help poverty in the third world, the refugee crisis, famine in Africa and an enormous number of issues in our broken fallen world.

We've seen how this mirrors God's extravagant and costly love for us all, so we should do it not because it's the Law, or because it will gain us eternal life, but out of gratitude for what God has done for us. The very costly love He displayed in sending his only Son to die on the cross, a love much more costly than even the overpoweringly generous love displayed by the Samaritan. So how about you? You've heard the word – will you do it? Will you turn to Christ in faith and ask for his forgiveness and accept him as your Lord and so accept his free compassionate gift of eternal life. Will you then ask for God's strength and a new infilling with the Holy Spirit to help you show his compassion to others. Don't think about it – just do it!

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard or the Parable of the Compassionate Employer

This Parable is only recorded by Matthew. It's about the reward for discipleship and comes after Jesus' comments to the disciples at the end of chapter 19 – the reversal of human expectations.

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the market-place doing nothing. He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’ ‘Because no-one has hired us,’ they answered. He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’ The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ‘These men who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’ But he answered one of them, ‘Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”
(Matthew 20:1-16 NIV)

The story is as clear as it is unexpected. It's in the setting of a vineyard, which would have both been familiar and was also an image of Israel. The vineyard owner needs extra workers, perhaps the vines need pruning, or maybe it's harvest time and he goes early to the village to hire men and hires a number for the then standard wage of one Denarius a day. He goes out again a number of times at various times during the day and hires further workers, telling them that he'll pay them what is right. Perhaps he didn't find enough early on, but more likely he's just being compassionate and alleviating the unemployment situation. In the end he pays all the men the same wage of one Denarius irrespective of when they were hired. He's giving the men enough to feed their families without making them feel as if they're on welfare – because he's given them a job.

Whereas we take it for granted that harder work deserves a greater payment, this employer operates on a less conventional basis. The reader instinctively sympathizes with the aggrieved workers in verses 11–12: it *doesn't* seem fair. The retort of the landowner is of course technically correct: no one has been cheated; the agreement has been scrupulously observed. Why then do we still feel that there is something wrong? Because we cannot detach ourselves from the ruling convention that rewards should be commensurate to the services rendered. Grace seems to us to be unfair. When one man is “rewarded” far in excess of what has been earned while another receives only the bare sum agreed, we detect unfair discrimination. Any union leader worth their salt would protest at such employment practices. Anyone who took this parable as a practical basis for employment would soon be out of business. Daily

workers were paid each day, here it's interesting that the last workers were paid first and the first last. Perhaps the workers who weren't hired early on were the least desirable workers or perhaps they arrived late we don't know. We also don't know what happened – did the workers who felt that they had been cheated continue to protest or did they just go away – we're not told, the parable is open ended.

The kingdom of heaven does not operate on the basis of commercial convention. God rules by grace, not according to what we deserve. The “rewards” which this gospel has so persistently spoken of (see on 5:3–10, 11–12; 6:1–6, 16–18, 19–21; 10:41–42; 19:27–29) are not earned, nor are they proportionate to human effort. The God who lavishly clothes the flowers and feeds the birds (6:26–29) delights to give his servants far more than they could ever deserve from him. It is that principle, rather than the disappointment of the whole-day labourers, which is the main focus of the parable, but their very natural disappointment and sense of unfairness helps the readers to re-examine how far their reactions are still governed by human ideals of deserving rather than by the uncalculating generosity of the kingdom of heaven. In the kingdom in which the first are last and the last first there is no room for envious comparisons.

The theme of divine generosity is enhanced by an awareness of the employment situation for day-labourers in first-century Palestine. The day-labourer did not have even the minimal security which the slave had in belonging to one master. There was no social welfare program on which an unemployed man could fall back and no trade unions to protect a worker's rights. An employer could literally “do what he chose with what belonged to him.” (v. 15) In such a setting no work meant no food for the family. The extraordinary behaviour of this landowner in adding extra workers after he has already recruited all he needs in the early morning therefore indicates not that he could not calculate his labour needs in advance but that he was acting compassionately to alleviate the hardship of the unemployed. It is unlikely that he *needed* the extra workers, and his excessive payment of them speaks for itself. Commercially, the man is a fool. And God is as uncalculating as that.

The blessing of eternal life is the same for all whether you're a Christian from a child or a death bed conversion. There aren't some people who are more saved than others.

The Parables about the End Times

“No-one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.” (Matthew 24:36-44 NIV)

The time of Christ's return is unknown (except to the Father) and so it will always catch people unawares – therefore the disciples (and we) must always be ready. As it was with the

flood (v 37 - 39) so it will be with the second coming. It's interesting that Jesus who will be the judge doesn't himself know the day of judgement. It's not surprising that we and the angels aren't told (for divine secrets are hidden from the angels (1 Peter 1)), but it's amazing that Jesus doesn't know.

Verse 42 seems to imply that we must always be on a state of red alert, but the following parables qualify how this is to apply in relation to every day life. It's more a state of ethical readiness than intellectual readiness. We need to continually live our lives as if Christ was coming any minute – we don't know the time so we can't plan special preparations. We must take the parables seriously but not too literally.

At the second coming people will be going about their everyday tasks – working in the field or grinding corn – some will be taken to be with Christ others not, or some will simply be swept away and others not. I think this is the division between the saved and the lost. I think the one who is left is the one who is excluded from God's presence. At the second coming there will be an abrupt and permanent division.

In verses 42-44 we're told to keep ready for the day of the Lord's coming and an example of a house being burgled is given – I think the thought here is the surprise, the unexpectedness, of the event.

Having set the scene Jesus moves into a longer parable about slaves left in charge:
“Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, ‘My master is staying away a long time,’ and he then begins to beat his fellow-servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matthew 24:45-51 NIV)

The parable is about our different responses to the situation in which we've been placed. We can either do what we're supposed to do and be good stewards or we can ignore what God wants. Jesus is challenging us to think about our own state of readiness. So being prepared isn't watching and waiting at the window, but getting on with the job we've been given and not slacking. It's only the irresponsible who need to worry about the second coming. But merely belonging to the disciple community is not a guarantee of salvation, there must be a real commitment – our faith must be real.

Also the faithful servant isn't left to rest in ease for ever, he's rewarded by being promoted to a higher level of responsibility. The unfaithful servant failed to recognise that his authority was only temporary. So it is with us here on earth, we'll be called to account in the end, delay doesn't imply forgiveness or overlooking of our wrongdoing. It would appear that the punishment is not death (the servant remains alive after being cut into pieces), but there is clearly a heavy punishment. Jesus was probably pronouncing a severe judgement on the Pharisees – and us as well if we don't listen to what he's saying to us.

The Parable of the Ten Virgins

Jesus continues to teach on the importance of readiness with an even longer parable.

“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. "At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’ "Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’ "‘No,’ they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’ "But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. "Later the others also came. ‘Sir! Sir!’ they said. ‘Open the door for us!’ "But he replied, ‘I tell you the truth, I don’t know you.’ "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.” (Matthew 25:1-13 NIV)

At first sight, the opening words of the story in verse 1 are similar to some earlier parables in this gospel. But whereas those earlier parables told us that the kingdom of heaven “*is like*” a man who sowed seed or a king who wanted to settle accounts; here we are told that the kingdom of heaven *will be* like ten virgins who took their lamps. That’s because this parable is telling us not about how things are now but how they will be at what is called the *parousia* in Greek. Parousia is a Greek word which means coming, arrival or physical presence and in this case it is referring to the second coming of Christ. So this parable is telling us about the end times. This reference to the future is reinforced by the first three words of verse 1 “At that time..” The virgins’ role in meeting and escorting the bridegroom reminds us of the image of Jesus as the bridegroom and the church as the bride in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians.

These virgins would have been young unmarried girls, friends of either the bride or the bridegroom and were apparently supposed to escort the bridegroom in a torchlight procession to his house. Under Jewish wedding customs there would have been a set day, but not a set time when the bridegroom would arrive at the bride’s home to take her to his home for the wedding feast, because the wedding procession would always wind back and forth through the village. So those who were to welcome the bridegroom had to be patient – just as we must patiently wait for the second coming of Christ. This is wonderful imagery reminding us that at the second coming we will be escorted to our place in God’s house and we wait patiently for that day.

We are then told in verse 2 that half of the girls are silly, whilst the other half are sensible. The Greek words used here for “foolish” and “wise” are the same as those used in the parable about the house builders, one of whom built on rock and the other on sand. Although these words apparently denote practical common sense they are really referring to spiritual wisdom.

The passage then goes on to describe the difference between the foolish and the wise in verses 3 and 4. The so called “lamps” were hollow cups or saucers, with a round receptacle for the wick, which was fed with pitch or oil. On occasions like this they were fastened to a long wooden pole, and borne aloft in the procession. The jars held the oil which was used to refill the cup or saucer. A lamp without a jar of oil would rapidly become as useless as a

modern flashlight without a battery. In the same way we Christians need to be regularly refilled with the oil of the spirit of Christ, otherwise we will become useless.

Let's move on to the coming of the bridegroom in verses 5 and 6. These verses give the impression that the girls thought they knew when the bridegroom would arrive, and had not reckoned on the delay. A torchlight procession would of course be after dark, but might be expected to be before the middle of the night. The parable illustrates both the fact that the time of Christ's second coming is unknown, and also that it may not be as soon as people might expect. After all, as we've just seen, in chapter 24 of Matthew's gospel, Jesus told us that even he did not know the day or the hour of this second coming. Additionally, the parable tells us of the sudden, unexpected nature of this coming because it came in the middle of the night, the time when people are at their least alert. The shout at midnight is like the voice of the archangel and the trump of God which will accompany the second coming of Christ. But the story has a really surprising element here – both the sensible and foolish girls have fallen asleep by the time the bridegroom comes. All were equally disappointed by the delay, all fell asleep, and all were equally taken by surprise by the eventual shout.

Now, in verses 7-9, we see what happened to the different kinds of girls. We don't know whether the lamps had been lit when the girls first set out, but if so they would not have stayed burning while they slept; even a well filled torch would not burn for much more than half an hour without trimming and adjustment. So the sensible girls now had to refill and light their torches, while the attempts of the silly girls to light their torches were of course futile.

The phrase "our lamps are going out" suggests that as the foolish girls lighted the wicks of their lamps they immediately went out again, having no more oil to keep them burning. The response of the sensible girls to the foolish girls' natural request for a share of the oil may sound selfish, actually the statement is even firmer in the Greek, but we need to remember that this is a parable about being spiritually prepared and the hard-nosed realism of the sensible girls invites us to remember that spiritual preparedness is not something that others can provide for us. Each one of us needs our own oil, each one of us needs to be spiritually prepared in our own hearts. Let us not be Christians who merely look good but lack the oil of true faith within us.

When the bridegroom comes the feast begins as we see in verses 10-12. The wedding banquet was the high point of a wedding and could last for a week or more – to miss that was to miss everything. Here the wedding banquet represents the blessings of the kingdom of heaven, just as the feast in the parable told at the beginning of Matthew chapter 22 did. As with that earlier feast only those who are ready can enjoy it. Again the exclusion of the foolish girls seems harsh and out of line with Jewish hospitality – although it was the custom at great feasts to close the doors when all the guests were assembled. But this has become, like so many of the other parables, a story of insiders and outsiders, of the saved and the lost, and the closing of the door symbolizes that final division at the last judgment. If Matthew this time refrains from speaking of "the darkness outside" and "weeping and gnashing of teeth" - as he did in connection with the other earlier parables about feasts, - he has made the same point unmistakably clear in the pathetic picture of the silly girls futilely calling outside a closed door. Here the Greek indicates that the door was shut so as to stay shut.

In a way we can liken this parable to the story of Noah. Noah built his ark in preparation for the coming judgment on the earth. When the rains started Noah and his family got into the

ark and closed the door. Those who were outside were excluded just as the foolish virgins were excluded from the wedding banquet. Similarly we shall be excluded from the kingdom of heaven if we are not prepared.

The bridegrooms dismissive words “I don’t know you” have the force of the judicial verdict at the final judgment. Let’s not be in the position where Christ says **that** to **us** as we stand before the judgement seat.

The point of the parable is simply that spiritual readiness, whatever form it takes, is not something that can be achieved by a last-minute adjustment. It depends on long-term provision, and if that has been made, the wise disciple can sleep secure in the knowledge that everything is ready – just as the wise girls slept and didn’t suffer for it.

The words of verse 13:

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.” (Matthew 25:13 NIV)

are a general reminder of the need to remain alert for, and above all to be prepared for, the second coming of Christ. Because we don’t know when he’s coming. It may be tomorrow or it may be in thousands of years. But, God warns each one of us to be ready for that day, not to rely on others to prepare for us and not to play Russian Roulette with our eternal lives. The only way to be ready for that day is to be ready all the time. The foolish virgins took no precautionary steps saying I’ll go to the store tomorrow, there is plenty of time and look what happened to them. Of course, we may well experience death before the time of the second coming arrives, but again we need to be ready or we shall also be excluded from the kingdom of heaven if we are not ready at that time.

As I’ve already said the foolishness of the virgins has a spiritual connotation. It’s foolish not to listen to God, it’s foolish to think our ideas are an acceptable alternative to what God says. Let’s not be unprepared after God has warned us clearly of the consequences in this parable and throughout the scriptures. Let’s all be sure that we are spiritually ready in our hearts. Let’s all realize that we are not guaranteed tomorrow. We need to be sure we are ready today, right now. We also need to make sure we are prepared in the right way. The foolish girls were prepared to turn out with their lamps and wait, but they weren’t prepared in the only way that counted – having oil to keep their lamps burning. So we need to make sure that we are prepared in what scripture tells us is the only way that counts – having the oil of saving faith, which is truly and sincerely believing in the death and resurrection of Christ and acknowledging him as our Lord and Master.

CONCLUSION

So let’s just summarise what we’ve learned from the parables we’ve studied together this morning.

The parable of the Sower and the Soils made us ask what kind of soil is in our live. We need to change our mental attitudes and priorities and turn to Jesus – the only one who can make us bear a good crop of fruit. We also need to sow the seeds of the gospel widely into the lives of those around us.

The parable of the Weeds taught us that we'll be irreversibly divided at the last judgement into the lost and the saved. But, until the final judgment there can be no division – we'll just have to co-exist with the wicked.

The parable of the Wedding Feast taught us that those who focus on their material wealth and not on the riches of faith are excluded from the kingdom of heaven by their own choice. We need to understand the gravity of our own position and accept the forgiveness Christ brought us on the cross – or we'll be excluded from the banquet in heaven.

The parable of the Lost Son is a call to turn back to God in repentance and accept his gracious invitation to be reconciled to him and be a part of his family.

The parable of the Shrewd Manager again taught us that we must use material wealth for spiritual purposes. We need to give generously to buy treasure in heaven. The money we have is not really ours, if we handle it badly we can't be trusted with true heavenly riches. Our discipleship needs to be wholehearted. We can devote ourselves to the service of God or money but not both.

The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus again taught us that we need to use our wealth wisely for compassionate purposes. We need to devote ourselves to the scriptures and not to material things – let's not get separated from God by an uncrossable chasm.

The parable of the Good Samaritan showed us that the Samaritan caring for the victim of robbery mirrors God's costly love for us. We need to turn to Christ in faith accepting God's generous gift of eternal life and asking for the power of the Spirit to enable us to show compassion to others.

The parable of the Workers in the Vineyard taught us that there is equality in our salvation. It doesn't matter whether we're Christians from birth or deathbed conversions, no one is more equal than anyone else as regards our salvation.

Finally the parable of the Ten Virgins taught us that we're not guaranteed tomorrow, we need to be ready to meet our maker right now this minute. We also need to make sure we're prepared for that in the right way. We need to have the oil of saving faith in our lamps, which is believing in the death and resurrection of Christ and acknowledging him as our Lord and master.

Let's make sure we all heed these lessons from Jesus's parables in our lives.