

TREASURES OF THE PARABLES

by Ray C. Stedman

- [1. What to do While Waiting, \(Matt. 24:45-51\) \(DP #371\)](#)
 - [2. Here Comes the Bridegroom, \(Matt. 25:1-13\) \(DP #372\)](#)
 - [3. To Risk or Not to Risk, \(Matt. 25:14-30\) \(DP #373\)](#)
 - [4. God and the Unthinking, \(Luke 15:1-7\) \(DP #374\)](#)
 - [5. God and the Neglected, \(Luke 15:8-10\) \(DP #375\)](#)
 - [6. God and the Rebellious, \(Luke 15:11-24\) \(DP 376\)](#)
 - [7. God and the Respectable, \(Luke 15:25-32\) \(DP #377\)](#)
 - [8. Get Smart With Money, \(Luke 16:1-14\) \(DP #378\)](#)
 - [9. The Main Thing, \(Luke 16:19-31\) \(DP #379\)](#)
 - [10. The Cure to Loneliness, \(John 12:20-26\) \(DP #380\)](#)
 - [11. Breaking the Resentment Barrier, \(Matt. 18:21-35\) \(DP #381\)](#)
 - [12. The Chance to Live, \(Matt. 22:1-14\) \(DP #382\)](#)
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WHAT TO DO WHILE WAITING

by Ray C. Stedman

This is the beginning of a new series on the parables of Jesus. The parables are very exciting and challenging portions of Scripture. They are like mystery novels; there is always something secret about them, something hidden; thus they are enticing, challenging. There are clues given in each of the parables to lead us to the meaning of it. This is God's way of stimulating us to investigate and discover a hidden truth which will be a real treasure to us, enriching our lives in fantastic ways when we act upon it. The study of the parables can be as exciting as reading a mystery novel -- even more so -- because you are always involved in the parable and there is a treasure to be found at the end.

When I was a boy in Montana we used to take tenderfeet out on what we called a snipe hunt. Snipes are birds, in case some of you did not know. The idea of a snipe hunt is to take some uninstructed individual, give him a gunny sack, and take him to the bottom of a gully on a pitch-black night. Then all his friends are supposed to go out on the hillside and scare the birds into the gully and, as they come in, he is to put them in the sack. If you have ever tried it, you found you were left holding the bag. Though snipe hunts are very exciting they

always are disappointing, especially to the one that is left holding the bag.

But not so with an investigation of the treasures of the parables. There you will end up with a tremendously exciting discovery of new truth.

We will begin with a series of three parables from our Lord's teaching in connection with the great Olivet discourse, as recorded in Matthew 24 and 25. I have chosen these because they are such a natural follow-up to our studies in the book of Daniel. There we were looking at prophetic matters, especially matters concerning the last days and the times of the return of Jesus Christ to earth. These three parables concern the same subject, but from three different approaches. They are:

- The parable of the household,
- The parable of the ten maidens (or ten virgins), and
- The parable of the talents.

All three parables are an amplification of one word which our Lord gave to his disciples, after he had outlined the course of events. He said to them, "Watch!" That word is stressed throughout this whole passage. It is the one command Jesus gives to those that are waiting for his coming. Through all the intervening centuries, no matter how long he may delay, the word is, "Watch!" These three parables tell us what it means to watch; therefore, they are extremely important to us.

In Chapter 24, Verse 42, Jesus says,

"Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." {Matt 24:42 RSV}

Also in verse 44,

"Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect." {Matt 24:44 RSV}

And again in Chapter 25, after he has completed the story of the ten maidens, he says in Verse 13, "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." It is clear then that he is amplifying the word, watch!

There have been, in the course of the centuries, two extremes of interpretation of what our Lord meant when he said, *Watch*:

1. There have been those who took it very seriously. They studied the signs of the coming of the Lord which are brought out in predictive passages in both the New Testament and the Old. They became so involved that they actually set dates for the return of Jesus Christ. Again and again men have said Jesus was coming on a certain day, on the basis of what they found in Scripture. Sometimes they have even sold their homes and property, put on white robes (I don't know why they always put on white robes; perhaps we associate white robes with the coming of the Lord. That makes you wonder what the Black Panthers are waiting for, doesn't it?) and have gone out on hilltops to wait for the Lord to return. He did not come, of course, and they were disappointed and had to explain by intricate interpretations of Scripture. But that is an extreme and wrong interpretation of what "watch" means. Our Lord did not mean that we are to be standing forever gazing up into the heavens, like an air raid sentry on duty. He means we are rather to involve ourselves in the activities brought out in these three parables. That is why he gave them to us.
2. Another extreme interpretation of "watch" is to come to the conclusion that we cannot know the time of the Lord's coming and therefore there is no use to worry about it. Forget it! Just go on living life as you like, until he comes. If he comes, then he comes. It is time enough to worry about it then. In the meantime, go on living as you please regardless of whether he is coming or not. That really is to live as though he were not coming at all. That is what many Christians have settled for.

But that is the reason our Lord gave us these parables. If we do not understand the parables, we will not watch

the way he tells us to. And if we do not watch, we will be deceived. The key note of this passage in Matthew 24 and 25 is that the intervening age, between the time our Lord uttered these words, and the time he would come again, is to be an age of unprecedented deceit, a time when it is easy to be fooled, when many will be attracted by the glamour of the phony, the glitter of the false, and we drawn away by enticing, siren voices that will lead down wrong paths, and get many confused. That is exactly what is happening in this 20th century, and it is increasing as we draw near the close. So it is absolutely important that we understand what our Lord means when he tells us to watch.

Let us take the first parable, found in Chapter 24, Verses 45-51:

"Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master when he comes will find so doing. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed,' and begins to beat his fellow servants, and eats and drinks with the drunken, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will punish him, and put him with the hypocrites; there men will weep and gnash their teeth." {Matt 24:45-51 RSV}

It is obvious that this situation fits us. Here is a household whose master is away and the household is waiting for him to return. The master has appointed certain servants and given them responsibility during the time of his absence.

1. The only activity mentioned is that of feeding the household. These servants have the primary and important task of feeding the household at the proper time. That is the first essential, then, in watching. Watching means to feed and be fed by the Word of God, as we shall see in a moment. This is most obvious in the parable, is it not? The household must eat or they can do nothing else. That is basic, fundamental. If they do not eat, they will not survive, they will perish. They can do nothing else until they have established their health and strength by eating.
2. Now the household is obviously the church, the house of God. It is so described in Scripture.
3. The servants are those appointed to teach within the church. It does not only mean pastors, evangelists, or theologians. It includes also editors of magazines, Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, children's Bible class teachers, even parents within the home who teach their children. It is any one who is in the position of teaching another within the body of Christ.

Notice how the Lord puts it? "Who then is the faithful and wise servant?" He invites us to put our own name there. Are you that kind of a servant? Are you a teacher? Well, then, are you this kind of a teacher? That is what Jesus is asking.

4. The food is obviously the Word of God. What else could it be? The Word of God is intended to feed the people of God. Jesus said so himself, remember? When the devil came and tempted him to turn the stones into bread, he said, "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God," {Matt 4:4, Luke 4:4 KJV}. The Word of God is truth. It is the unveiling of reality. It is the revelation of the way things really are. Thus if you are going to live you have got to know what life is all about, to know the way things really are. That is why the word of truth is also food. It is referred to as such in many places in Scripture:

In his first letter Peter exhorts us to "desire the sincere milk of the word, that we may grow thereby," {cf, 1 Pet 2:2 KJV}. There is a certain quality about the Word of God that is like milk to a baby: it feeds and establishes life.

In another place Paul mentions the strong meat of the word, {cf, Heb 5:12, 5:14}. There is something that the most intelligent mind can ponder and which will sustain the most advanced Christian. There is power in it, and strength to be derived from it. It is absolutely essential and fundamental to spiritual growth or understanding of life.

Many Christians are confused about the need to study the word. They think of it as kind of an option,

something to do if you are especially religious. But that is not what it is for at all. It is for those who want to find out what life is all about. It is not just for the religious but is the revelation of the way things are -- in life, in death, in the universe, the physical universe as well as the world of ideas, thoughts, and the social life of man. It touches everything. You never can understand life unless you understand the Word of God. That fact is basic, essential, and fundamental to the whole Christian message. Therefore, we are not talking about something that ought to interest only the religious; it ought to interest anyone, anywhere. That is the character of the Word of God.

In this parable you will notice that the Lord takes note of two kinds of servants: There are the faithful, and the faithless.

- The faithful are those who feed, continually and plentifully, the ones entrusted to their care. When the master returns, Jesus says, "Blessed (or happy) is that servant when his master comes and finds him doing what he was told to do."

His approbation is put in these terms: "he will set him over all his possessions." From that you can gain an idea of how important this is. To feed someone else from the Word of God is to learn how to live yourself. If you learn how to understand life the way God has designed it and made it, then you can understand how the universe functions, and the marvelous procedure by which God relates to man, works through man, and lives in man. You become master of the secrets of life. Then when the Lord returns he will give you an opportunity to exercise that knowledge in realms of power beyond belief, beyond your highest imaginings right now. The Word of God is full of hints like this of what the future is like for those who learn how to live down here, now. It will be incredibly exciting. It will be beyond our wildest imaginations. We will be equipped with power and tools more exciting and more capable than any we can possibly imagine now. We will be given tasks of fantastic involvement, demand and challenge. All this is hidden in these words, "he will set him over all his possessions."

It includes everything, does it not? "You are Christ's and Christ is God's," says Paul, "therefore all things are yours," {cf, 1 Cor 3:23}. There are tremendous possibilities involved in that passage.

- Well then, what about the faithless servant? This is the one who fails to feed the household of God. The Lord tells us what happens. He cannot control the household and begins to beat them. The only way he can get them to do what he wants is to lash at them, beat them, hound them and strike them. He suffers in his own person a moral breakdown. He indulges his own appetites to extremes, eats and drinks with the drunken. When the master returns he finds the man failing in his primary task and he is condemned and sent to a place of frustration and eternal defiance against the will of God. There men weep out of a sense of lost opportunity, and gnash their teeth in defiance of God.

All of this underscores the importance of feeding on the word. That is the whole thrust of this parable, it is what our Lord wants to emphasize.

What does the Word of God accomplish that makes it so absolutely, fundamentally, necessary? I should like to list for you seven things from the Scriptures, which the Word of God does. They are gleaned from many places, so I shall not attempt to quote Scripture in support. But you will find that these seven things can never be obtained from any other source. Nothing else will accomplish the seven things which the Word of God alone can do in your life.

As we go through this list you will see how much power there is in this remarkable word. It is a most powerful instrument.

I had the experience this week of watching the manuscript of my first book printed by a computer at Stanford. It was done by a new process in which the manuscript was typed directly into the computer, then changes can be made, and the computer will print it back as changed. It can print the entire book of some 200 pages in less than ten minutes! As I was watching it do this, I wondered what effect the Word of God would have on that computer. I seriously doubt if you could get it to print anything pornographic from now on!

The **first** of the seven accomplishments is, the Word of God reveals Jesus Christ and thus strengthens and

refreshes the human spirit. That is its primary purpose. If it does nothing else than that, it has achieved its major task. It is not to give us information, primarily; it is to help us to see a Person, the Lord Jesus. As the opening words of Hebrews puts it,

"In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son," {Heb 1:1-2a RSV}

What the Son says to us is the ultimate revelation of life. To see the Son, through the medium of the word, is to find your own heart attracted and drawn to this marvelous personality, this magnificent One, this spotless, unsullied Son of God, in all the magnificence of his strength and greatness. That is the Bible's primary purpose. When you read it, read it for that. Read it to find Christ, because he is on every page of the Old and the New Testament. The Bible is all about Jesus Christ.

The **second** thing is, the Word makes possible increasing self-understanding, and therefore knowledge of and guidance for yourself. James says the word is a mirror: When you stand in front of it, you will see yourself. There is no other book in the world which will do this. There are helpful insights in psychology and psychiatry, but the help you get from these ultimately derives from the Bible. Yet the Bible goes much further than any of these; it truly helps you understand yourself. An eminent French professor, Dr. Emile Caillet, who was an agnostic tells how he became a Christian through a remarkable experience of being given a Bible in a most unusual way. He calls the Bible, "The Book That Understands Me," because that is what struck him most forcibly about it. It understood him and helped him to understand himself.

The **third** item is, the Word will lead to the exercise of true power and impact. It will make your life count. It turns life into something worth the living, something worthwhile. If you learn the truth about yourself, and you learn the truth about Jesus, and discover that God has put the two together -- he in you -- you have discovered the secret of power! You have found in that secret the way by which your life may be made to count, and become exciting and meaningful. Paul puts in one brief phrase the whole story "Christ in you" {Col 1:27}, the only hope you will ever have of obtaining the exciting glory that God intends for human beings.

The **fourth** factor is that the Bible explains the cause and cure of family, social, and world problems. You can not understand what is going on in your family life, your social life, and in all the problems that are before us in international affairs, unless you understand the viewpoint of the Bible. I make that statement unequivocally. I do not know anyone who understands what is going on who ignores the Bible. Most admit themselves they do not understand. Statesmen confess today that they do not know what is happening in the world, nor why it is happening. Students of social problems, psychologists, philosophers, etc., admit they do not know what is happening. Economists state flatly that they do not understand what is happening to our economy, nor how to solve its problems. More and more there comes, from all directions, a confession of utter bankruptcy in understanding what is happening in life. One great thing about the Bible is that it gives us a world view which fits all the symptoms. It explains them logically, reasonably, and offers the only possible remedy for them. It gives not only the cause but the cure, as far as any individual is able to work it out, so that no one need any longer be a part of the problem but may become a part of the solution.

The **fifth** item is, the Bible gives specific answers to many questions on life and death. Are there other beings in the universe? The Bible answers that. What happens after death? Who hasn't asked that question? The Bible can answer it. What is wrong with premarital sex? The Bible answers that. What happens to a society that lets down the barriers and goes all the way in sexual matters? The Bible can tell you, and it is unquestionably true, because you can see it demonstrated all around. How did evil originate? Where did it come from? Oh, the many questions that are answered in the Word.

Six, it reveals the future and the past. It goes back to the origin of the universe and of man himself, and then looks on to the end of history and tells us what the final pattern or events will be. No other book can do that; there is no other source of knowledge like that.

Finally, **seventh**, it protects from unknown dangers. We have no idea what a knowledge of the Bible is doing for us in protecting us from demonic assault, from the occult, the weird, from hidden temptations and the dangers of the unknown. Increasingly we are made aware that men do not know very much about such things

despite all our vaunted knowledge. >From those vast areas of mystery and darkness there come all sorts of dangers from which the knowledge of the Word, even though we may not understand the nature of the dangers themselves, nevertheless will deliver us.

A Christian who learns to feed on the Word becomes stable, alive, vital, an exciting person. Whenever a church takes the Word of God seriously you will always find it to be alive, extremely vital, changing society around.

In all honesty, we must admit that this is rare. The church in many places has grown incredibly weak. Many are made up of people who are constantly at one another's throats, quarreling, self-indulgent, immoral.

Why?

Well, see how the Lord puts his finger right on it! It is because they are not properly fed, that is why. They are not satisfied by the Word of God. And why do they have no food? Because those responsible have lost the hope of the coming of the Lord! That is what Jesus says. "But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'my master is delayed,' then he will beat his fellow servants," and lose his own moral standards. That is what has happened in the church. You can trace the pattern clearly.

I know a man who was once a very close and dear friend. We understood one another, shared Christian fellowship often together. But one of the points of disagreement we had was on the matter of the coming of the Lord. He rejected ultimately the truth that Jesus Christ was coming back again. Though he was a trained minister, he began to drift from his moorings, and soon it was quite apparent that he was losing his grasp on life. Now he is completely out of the ministry, having totally renounced his Christianity. This pattern of failure takes place again and again today. The Lord knows what he is talking about.

When we lose the hope of his coming there is no longer incentive to feed the people. And when they have no food, seven things happen to them that are the exact opposite of the seven things I have just set before you. Let me run quickly through them:

- First, there is no inner strength or nourishment for the human spirit. There is no vital contact with God. There is no personal, individual knowledge of the Lord Jesus, and therefore, there is no inner strength in life.
- Second, there is ignorance of self. They do not understand themselves, they cannot. This creates a tremendous demand for self-knowledge and is what lies behind the increasing cry in our day for psychiatry and other sciences which try to work in these areas and quite honestly try to help, but can only go so far. They can help only to a degree. Men are turning to these empty cisterns of human help to find the self-knowledge they are lacking because they do not know the Word.
- Third, there is no power in life, and there cannot be. Instead there come division, quarreling, and fighting one with another because there is no power to regulate life.
- Fourth, world conditions baffle and depress them. You only have to read widely today to see how true this is, how many so-called Christians in churches are absolutely baffled by the conditions taking place in the world. They do not understand them at all.
- Fifth, there is no answer to the questions they ask. Death is a frightening thing. They do not know where to turn when they face it.
- Sixth, there are widespread delusions adopted about the past and the future. They seize upon any reasonable sounding explanation of where men came from, regardless of whether it squares with facts or not. They leap upon hopeful optimistic dreams of the future that are not based upon the stark reality of human evil, and they believe these delusions.
- Seventh, they are exposed without defense to dark powers that move in to take over and possess the human spirit. More and more widely in our day we are finding this taking place.

Now what is our Lord saying to us?

Well, he is saying that if you are going to watch for his coming, the first essential is that you must know the Word of God. You must read and learn and study and seek to know him, first of all.

How well do you know the Word of God?

I want to put that question to you as members in attendance here at Peninsula Bible Church.

We have a reputation for knowing and teaching the Bible, but I am afraid there is still much biblical illiteracy among us. There are people who do not know anything about the Bible at all. I want to ask you to measure yourself by three tests which are given in Hebrews 5, by which you can check yourself as to how much you know of Scripture. I am not going to ask you how far it is from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, and I do not care how many kings there were in Israel, or how many in Judah. Those are not the important questions. But here are the three things that will test you.

- First, can you tell the difference between right and wrong, especially when right looks wrong, and wrong looks right? Have you learned how to use Scripture so as to tell the difference?
- Second, can you translate Scripture into right conduct? Have you learned how to apply what you read to your own life, so that it changes you and you end up doing the right instead of the wrong? Or do you constantly find yourself thinking you are doing the right thing and end up by looking back and finding that you have made a mistake again. That shows you do not know the Word of God.
- The third test is: Can you teach others? Are you able to help someone else? Or have you been a Christian all these years and you still do not know how to teach anyone else, but you need yourself to be taught the first principles of the Word of God.

These are the ultimate tests.

They are very important because if you are not on the way to these goals then you do not have much of chance to stand in these days of deceit. We are moving into a time in history when we shall be flooded with more pressure to accept false ideas than we have ever had before. We are already feeling the pressure. Widespread delusions are abounding in our day based on philosophies that are basically, fundamentally wrong. Yet students and adults are accepting them with the utmost gullibility. I find this is true all over. You will never be able to stand against this flood of deceit unless you know something about the Word of God.

That is what Jesus is saying. If you do not know it, you will be sucked in, you will not be able to stand.

When he returns, he will decide what to do with you.

We are now going to celebrate the Lord's table. This is fundamentally a commitment service, a time when we recommit ourselves again to the principles for which Jesus Christ stands. I would urge that each of us make it the kind of a commitment service in which we say to ourselves, "I'm going to learn the Scriptures, I'm going to study, and know the Bible." That will take resolve on your part, and it will take continuing exposure to the Word, both publicly and in private. You cannot learn it all in a public meeting. Let us now make this the point of our commitment.

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HERE COMES THE BRIDEGROOM

by Ray C. Stedman

We began last Sunday a look at the parables of our Lord, and especially those which reveal the attitudes and activities of those who are waiting for his coming again. We shall look today at the well-known parable of the ten virgins or maidens. This parable is very appropriate to this May season because it concerns a wedding. May is "apple blossom time," as the old song reminds us,

Some day in May
I'll come to say
Happy the bride that
The sun shines on today.

But at the wedding referred to in this parable the bride is not much in evidence, in fact she does not appear at all. The parable concerns an absent bridegroom, and it is only incidentally about him for our Lord focuses primarily upon those who are waiting for the bridegroom. This is because the wedding in this parable is an Eastern wedding, and in the East customs are different than they are in the West. In the Eastern wedding the bridegroom is the important figure. He pays all the expenses of the wedding.

Having experienced a wedding in our family this last fall, I strongly believe we ought to get back to the Bible in these matters!

Our Lord is spotlighting the experience of ten young maidens who were waiting for the coming of the bridegroom. There may be young ladies here this morning who say, "I've been waiting for a bridegroom for a long time, but no one has appeared yet." But these young maidens were waiting in a quite different sense than some of you may have in mind. Their experience is described for us in the first six verses:

"Then the kingdom of heaven shall be compared to ten maidens who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.'" {Matt 25:1-6 RSV}

Weddings were always held at night in the East, and, as far as I know, it is still the custom in these areas. Often the festivities lasted for an entire week and at any time during that week the bridal party was expected to appear. The bridegroom would come to get his bride and they would walk together to the site of the wedding, taking the longest possible route through the town. There would be various groups of people waiting at different corners to join the wedding party as they went toward the wedding. That is the background of the picture our Lord draws here.

Here are ten young girls waiting to join the wedding party. They are expecting the bridegroom (some accounts read, "and the bride") and therefore they are waiting expectantly.

Now, as in the previous parable of the household which was waiting for its absent lord, this parable obviously is intended to describe us. Our Lord knew at this time that he was soon going away. He knew there would be an intervening period of time before his return again and he is describing by means of these three parables what he means by his command, watch: "Watch therefore for you know neither the day nor the hour when your lord comes," {Matt 25:13}. What he means by "watch" is brought out in these parables:

Last week we saw that the first parable indicates that watching involves understanding and obeying the Word of God. We are to feed upon the word. This is important because it is what God has put us here for. We so easily lose our perspective on life. We think we have been put here to demonstrate our talents, or to make a living, or to live as comfortable a life as possible. All these things are part of God's blessing but the real reason we are here is to learn how to live, and we learn to live by the word of God -- not merely understanding it but actually working it out into life. Unless we learn to feed upon the Word we will never learn to live. That is why Jesus underscores this with tremendous emphasis, "Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God," {cf, Matt 4:4}.

In this parable of the ten maidens we learn another phase of what "watching" means. Here is another challenge to find hidden truth. One of the exciting things about parables is to learn to discover such hidden truths and to dig them out by means of the clues that are given. Here is this story about ten girls, waiting for the bridegroom's coming and certain clues are given to us to reveal the meaning our Lord is after.

Notice, first of all, that there is a division among these ten. They fall into two groups: five were wise, and five were foolish. The first question therefore that immediately confronts us is, "What makes the difference?" In what way are five wise, and the other five foolish? You can see immediately that there were certain very similar things about all ten of them. They all had lamps, so that is not the ground of division. Also, they all had oil when they started; so it is not that. Further, they all were expecting the bridegroom's coming; they all had a sense of expectation. Also, when he was delayed, they all went to sleep. Though that does not mark the ground of division yet it is a very significant thing. In each of these parables the Lord clearly indicates that his second coming is going to be long delayed. Surely that is most important.

There are some who teach that Jesus was mistaken about the time of his return. They say that the Scriptures indicate that he was to come back immediately, and that all the early Christians expected him to return promptly because that is what he himself said. These teachers tell us that Jesus was wrong. He was obviously mistaken about the time of his return, so they reject completely his whole teaching concerning his return on the basis that he was mistaken about its timing. But Jesus did not teach a soon return at all. He clearly indicated, not only by implication and indirect statement, as in this parable, but also very specifically that it would be a long time before his return. The bridegroom would be delayed.

In the previous parable of the household there is the same thing. The servant says to himself, "My lord delays his coming," {Matt 24:48}.

Also in the following parable we find it even clearer. "After a long time" {Matt 25:19} the master comes to demand an accounting from his servants. Jesus clearly taught that it would be a long time before his return to earth again.

So, while they were waiting for the bridegroom, the ten maidens fell asleep. Here again some who read this parable misinterpret it and say that this is wrong; these girls should never have slept. They liken it to Christians who forget about the coming of the Lord, lose all interest in his appearing, and get involved in life's matters. But there is nothing in this story to indicate that it was wrong for these girls to sleep. It was a perfectly natural thing for them to do. After all, it was night, and since it was a festive occasion and they could not do any work there is no reason why they should not sleep. They were simply waiting for the bridegroom to appear, and, when he was delayed, it was only natural for them to catch a few winks while waiting. Doubtless they placed some kind of a watch to arouse them when the bridegroom does appear, for this is what happened. Our Lord never indicates any blame toward these maidens because they slept. The foolish slept, and the wise as well. We must be careful, in interpreting these stories, not to read into them things that are not implied.

It is, perhaps, suggestive that our Lord records that they all slept. This indicates that when he said "watch" he clearly did not mean that we are to be constantly thinking about his return. He underscores the fact that watching involves doing perfectly normal things while waiting. Work needs to be done. Babies must be changed. Buses must operate. Banks have to be run. Schools must be operated, and studies engaged in. Hospitals have to be open; all types of activities must go on. There is nothing wrong with this. To be involved in the natural normal affairs of life does not mean that you stopped waiting for the Lord's return; it is all part of the process, a perfectly normal part.

But now, according to the story, at midnight came a cry, "Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." That immediately plunges us into the rest of the story,

"Then all those maidens rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, 'Perhaps there will not be enough for us and for you; go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.' And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready

went in with him to the marriage feast; and the door was shut. Afterward the other maidens came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.' Watch therefore for you know neither the day nor the hour." {Matt 25:7-13 RSV}

It is immediately evident from this that the crucial difference between the wise and the foolish lay in the fact that the wise had extra oil. They all had oil to begin with, but the wise took along an extra supply. That is what made it possible for them to endure the unexpected delay of the bridegroom.

Surely that is the crucial point is it not?

The whole parable hangs on this one thing: There was with the wise an extra hidden supply of oil.

There are two things that are made clear by this part of the story: One is that without a light these maidens could not get into the marriage feast. Our Lord does not say why, but it is obviously clear that without a light they would not be admitted. The lamp -- or light -- is used throughout Scripture as a symbol of knowledge or understanding. We use it the same way today. We say, "I'd like a little more light on this subject," meaning "I need more knowledge of it." So it is in this story. All ten had some light, some knowledge or understanding, but five had a deeper, hidden, resource of light.

If we apply this to ourselves this morning, we can see how truly it fits. Every one here has a certain degree of light about our Lord's return and its relation to the course of history. In that respect we all have light amid the darkness of the age in which we live. We know more than those who do not understand this truth. We know there is a purpose to history, and that it is all going to end according to schedule. Symbolically, these maidens all had to have at least this much knowledge. Light was supplied by the oil, and therefore it was absolutely essential that they have an adequate supply of oil, otherwise their light would go out.

It is also clear from this account that they could not borrow another's supply. When the bridegroom came and their lights began to flicker from lack of oil, the foolish said to the wise, "Give us of your oil, for our lights are going out." But the wise said, "No, we cannot do that, otherwise we will not have enough for ourselves. You'll have to go yourself and get more." But it was too late. By the time the foolish returned, the door was shut, and they were met by this word of the Lord's, "I never knew you," and, of course, weddings are no place for strangers.

There are some who feel the Lord is very unfair here, that he should have let these maidens in. After all, they too were earnestly, sincerely waiting for his return, and the fact that they did not have enough oil was hardly their fault for they did not realize that he was going to be delayed. Therefore he ought to have let them in. But we must be careful, when we read these parables, not to read them from our limited point of view. The Lord is right about what he says; he always is. We therefore must not challenge his appraisal of a situation. He knows what he is talking about. When he excludes these five foolish ones he is revealing to us that we must seek seriously his reason for doing so. He says he never knew them, they were strangers to him. They never were a part of the true family, waiting for the bridegroom. We must understand what it is, then, which rendered them strangers. As we have already seen, it centers on this matter of the oil.

Oil, throughout the Scriptures, is commonly used as a type or picture of the Holy Spirit. Some of you remember that in the book of Zechariah the prophet was given a vision of two olive trees standing, one on either side of a lampstand, and the oil from the olive trees dripped into a bowl on top of the lampstand. It was the oil, constantly flowing down, which caused the lamps in the lampstand to burn. Zechariah was told that the oil symbolized the Spirit of God. It is here we have that great quotation which is frequently heard, although very few people realize where it is from. Zechariah is told, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts," {Zech 4:6b KJV}. The oil is a picture of the power of the Holy Spirit which keeps the light of knowledge and truth burning brightly.

This is also what we have here in this parable. It is the ministry of the Holy Spirit, revealing truth, revealing knowledge. The overall picture is that of a group of people very much like this congregation this morning. If we would take this parable as our Lord intended it to be taken, as a picture of those who are living in the time

between his first coming and his second, who are waiting for his appearing and who have some understanding of the fact that he is coming again, then this congregation becomes very much the same kind of group as is described in the parable. There are certain wise among us who have an extra supply of oil, a supply adequate to meet the test of whatever may come. But there are also some among us, without question, who are foolish, who have been coming week after week agreeing with and understanding much of the doctrine of our Lord's return, but who lack an adequate supply of oil, who have never really discovered the full ministry of the Spirit. There is a ministry of the Holy Spirit to the minds and hearts of those who are not yet born again. He enlightens them to a degree, as they read the Bible, and they understand such truth as the Lord's return, but they have never yet come to the place where the truth has really gripped them. They have understood it, but it has not yet gripped and held them. They have not yet come into a personal knowledge of the One whom the truth is to reveal, the Lord Jesus Christ.

That is the whole purpose of Bible study. It is not to learn merely what God is going to do with the world, or to understand your own psychological make-up; it is rather that you might come to understand and to know personally, in a day-by-day living relationship, the Lord Jesus Christ who has come to live within you. That is the basis for true life. That, of course, is the extra flask of oil hidden away inside. Those who have it do not look any different than anyone else. No one sees it there. But when the hour of testing comes, when the pressures come, their light does not go out. They will hold to the truth and maintain it.

That is the picture here in this parable. As life moves on, and cares press upon us, our early zeal as Christians fades and the excitement of knowing God dims. That is when the test comes. Then our knowledge of Christ must go deeper than the head; it must reach the heart. We must become basically changed by the truth. That is what our Lord is bringing out. There is a kind of Christian veneer which can be put on. You can learn in Sunday school how to act like a Christian. You can learn what Christian truth is, learn the doctrines of Christianity, learn the truth it teaches. You can fill your head with this kind of thing and display it on Sundays, but it will not make any essential difference in your life during the week, at home. These are the foolish. They have no extra oil. They have truth for the surface of life, but none for the depths, the crises. They know the doctrine of the Scripture, but they do not know the power of it. It is in their head but it has never reached the heart. They believe in Jesus as Savior, but they have never known him as a living Lord. That is what makes the difference. That is what our Lord is saying. Without that you cannot properly watch for his appearing.

As the days get more critical, as error becomes more believable and is more widespread, it becomes harder and harder to believe the truth. Only if the truth has actually gripped you, and you are held by the Son of God himself, will you be able to stand in the hour of testing. The wise have oil for the crisis hour. When the hard test comes and the pressures are on, their light does not flicker or gutter and go out in darkness. They do not give up -- or give in! The truth is not forsaken, but they cling to it even more closely. When the final summons comes they are ready to enter in. That is clearly, unmistakably, the picture our Lord draws, is it not?

It is quite possible for us to know many things about Christianity, but never really let it make any changes in our hearts or lives. I know many like this. They can quote Scripture by the yard. They know the doctrines, they are well acquainted with the Bible, but their homes are no different than others around. They live on the same basis, they judge by the same values. There is no real difference in their lives. Their reasons for doing things are exactly the reasons others have who are not Christians. It is these our Lord is describing. They will never stand the test.

I believe we are living in this kind of an hour. It has been most striking to me to note in the last few years that many whom I and others have thought were stable, solid Christians, have left the Christian faith, have denied the Lord who bought them, and have turned away from the truth. Just this last week Mr. Roper was telling me about some of the students at Stanford who once were with us here; earnest, vibrant, young Christians, obviously excited about what they were learning. But one of them is now a professed Communist. Another one is drifting away and denying the reality of Christianity. What happened? How could this happen? It is because they did not have extra oil. The truth had never gone deep, never challenged the will. They had never bowed to the Lordship of Jesus or submitted themselves to him, committing themselves to follow him wherever he goes, so that even in the hour when Christianity does not look like it makes sense, they can say, with Peter, "Lord, to whom can we go? You alone have words of eternal life," {cf, John 6:68}. That is the ultimate test.

There comes a time when all the things we learn in Scripture -- its philosophy and its pattern of life -- can appear to us to be nonsense, to be untrustworthy, unreliable, and like the rest of knowledge around, to be uncertain, unsure. We can easily be afflicted this way, it can happen to us all. In that hour, what will hold you steady? If you have not yet come to a place of deep commitment to the Person of the Lord Jesus, you will not be held steady in that hour. All your knowledge will disappear. Something else will prove as attractive and as compelling in its logic as Christianity, and you will be ready to for that. It is only when, in the final analysis, you cannot forsake him, there is no place else to go, and though perhaps you are not sure that what he says will turn out to be right, nevertheless it is the best possible chance, that you will stand. That is the ultimate test. Jesus says those are the wise who are kept in times of pressure. When darkness settles upon the earth their lights do not go out because they are fed by a reserve supply of the Holy Spirit who dwells within them, to keep them in the time of pressure.

Are you ready for that?

That is what this parable is all about. If you do not have that quality of relationship of Jesus Christ, you will not stand the test.

You have never really been a Christian; that is what Jesus is saying. You have been a surface Christian, committed only to certain truths, but never to a Person; related only to certain doctrinal matters, but never gripped by a Lord who compels you, controls you, and runs your life. That will be the final test for the wise and the foolish.

What does our Lord mean by watching?

It means to know his Word, that is the first step. But now he adds a second element to that. That knowledge of the Word must go deeper than the surface. It must be an obedience of the heart, a trusting, a giving over completely of the central control of your life, your will, to the Lord Jesus Christ. This results in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit who is the One who will hold you steady in the hour of crisis.

Are you wise? Or foolish?

Prayer

Our Father, you who know our hearts know who are the wise and who are foolish among us. Here we all are, waiting for the coming of the Lord, committed to the truth of Christianity, here because we believe Jesus is coming back again and that history will end as he says. Yet Lord, among us, as you have made so clear in this parable, there are some who do not have the extra supply of oil. They have light, but not enough; knowledge, but not an adequate supply. They still do not know you, Lord Jesus. We pray that here, in this place, and at this moment, any who by the Holy Spirit, realize that this is their condition, may right now correct it. May they commit themselves to the One who alone can sustain them in the approaching hour of darkness. We ask in his name, Amen.

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TO RISK OR NOT TO RISK

by Ray C. Stedman

The familiar parable of the talents found in Matthew 25 is the third in the series our Lord gave his disciples at the close of his great Olivet discourse. After outlining the course of events from the time of his first coming through the destruction of Jerusalem under the Roman armies and the turbulent movements that would flow through the intervening age before he came again, he closes with a word of admonition contained in one word, *watch*. To expound what that word means he has given us these parables. They describe what it means to be watching for his return.

It does not mean gazing up into the sky, or holding continuous prayer meetings dressed in white robes, selling all your property, or not being involved in life. This we have already seen. But it does involve three specific things.

- We have seen that the parable of the household exhorts us to feed upon the Word of God. That is the primary responsibility of the body of Christ, to feed itself and thus maintain its strength and health. Our Lord put this first because it is fundamental. If we do not feed upon the Word of God we are blind, and will succumb to the illusions of the age in which we live. This is demonstrable on every side today. There are Christians who, because they are Christians ought to know better, but they are conforming to the movements of the day and the spirit of the age and are involved in things they have no business being involved in. It is because they have not fed upon the Word of God. This is absolutely essential.
- The second parable is that of the ten maidens. There we learned that our feeding on the Word must go deep. We have need of the oil of the Holy Spirit that the lamp of testimony might burn brightly in the darkness of this age. But it is to be oil at a deep level. It is the ministry of the Holy Spirit, not only to instruct the head but also to indwell the heart. That, too, is essential. Without that there can be no true watching for his return.
- Now we come to the parable of the talents. This adds yet another element in what it means to watch.

The story is introduced for us in Verses 14-18:

"For it will be as when a man going on a journey called his servants and entrusted to them his property; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them; and he made five talents more. So also, he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money." {Matt 25:14-18 RSV}

It is evident even this early in the story that we have the same basic pattern as in the other two parables. Here is a master who is absent, and certain ones are waiting for the return of their absent lord. Clearly this is a parable addressed to us. We are waiting for the return again of Jesus Christ to earth. We are like these servants who are waiting for the return of their master. This parable, then, is intended to instruct us during that time.

Now, the central question in the parable is: what do these talents represent? This ought to quicken our interest a bit and stir our excitement because this is a quest, a search, for hidden truth. When we learn what these talents mean we will know what it is our Lord is saying in this story. And if we know what he is saying, we will discover a truth that is enriching and exciting. In all these parables there are certain clues given, and it is important in reading the parables to look for the clues. They render the parable as exciting as any mystery novel.

I should like to dispose immediately of certain rather shallow ideas that have gathered around this parable of the talents. There are some who take the word *talent* as referring to the natural gifts that each of us possess. They say the teaching of this parable is that we are to use our talents for the Lord's sake. But if you read the

parable that way you are being misled by the modern use of the word *talent*. Talent, to us, means an ability, a capacity, a natural ability to do something. You may have a talent, perhaps, for singing, or for organizing, or for leadership, or athletics, or whatever it may be. But that is not what talent means here. In biblical times a talent meant a weight of money, a considerable weight. It would equal in value about \$1,000 dollars. So the Lord, when he went away, distributed money among his servants, a considerable amount. Now the talents represent something definite in our lives, but, as we will see in a minute, it does not represent our natural ability. It is something else, and what that is we are anxious to find. When they spoke of a many-talented man in Bible days, they did not mean someone with great natural gifts; they meant somebody very rich. To put your talents to work meant you invested your money.

There are also certain ones who read this parable as though it referred to the Christian's use of his time in order to determine what reward will belong to him when the Lord returns. But that is not the issue here. You only have to read the last verse of the story to see that this is not the case. It is not a matter of reward for Christians, but it is a matter of life and death. It is a matter of salvation, as Verse 30 clearly indicates. The last word of the Lord concerning the one-talented man is, "Cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth." In other words, he is eternally lost. So it is not dealing with the rewards of Christians, but with the eternal destiny of men and women.

Well, that brings us to the central question: "What are these talents?" Let us see if we can find out. There are four clues that are given that will help us in this search.

The first one is quite obvious, in the fourteenth verse.

"For it will be as when a man going on a journey called his servants and entrusted to them his property." {Matt 25:14 RSV}

The lord in the story is representative of our Lord who has gone away. Before he went he distributed "his property." Thus the talent here in this story represents something that belongs to God, not to men. It is not something we have; it is something he owns and distributes among men according to his will. That is the first clue. Anything we feel this means will have to be tested against that requirement. It must be something that belongs to God, not to man.

The second clue is found in the next verse:

"to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability." {Matt 25:15a RSV}

That last phrase, "to each according to his ability," is the clue. The property that belongs to God is given to us on the basis of natural abilities. It is on the basis, in other words, of our natural gifts. The talents obviously then do not represent these natural gifts. They are something that is related to them, but they are not the same thing. Surely that helps us in our search. They are something that is given on the basis of the fact that you have certain natural talents, natural gifts.

Now the third clue is implied in the whole story. It is not stated directly, but it is clearly implied. It is that these talents are something the lord gave in order that they might be invested. They are something that can be risked, something that can be ventured. These men were to put them to work earning more. They were to risk them, invest them. Thus the talents represent in our lives something that is God's property, given to us on the basis of natural gifts, and which can be put to work, invested, risked.

Now we have one more clue, and it is related to the last one. It is clear from this story that the investment of talents is made on behalf of the absent lord, not the servant. It is something the servant risks to benefit the absent lord. It is something he does in order to help his master. The risk is taken by the servant; the benefit will belong to the lord. The servant is expected to do this without deducting any broker's fee for the risk taken.

Well what is it? Let us ask ourselves. Here we have the clues: something that is God's property, not ours, but is distributed to each of us who profess to be Christians on the basis of the natural abilities we have; it is

something we can risk, but not for our sake but for the Lord.

What is it? Do you know? Let me put it this way. Having certain natural gifts within you (you young people are beginning to discover your abilities, your talents, your gifts), what are you going to do with them, once you have discovered them? You older ones, having found that you have certain gifts, what then do you seek for? Opportunity to exercise them. You are looking for the opportunity to put your gifts to work. But have you discovered that those opportunities are not something you can create, they are something God determines? Who of us has not talked about the "lucky breaks" we have had in order to show our abilities, give us a chance, etc. Those lucky breaks, as we call them, are God-given opportunities. If we think that we engineer them, how many of us can also remember the times we have experienced what we call "bad breaks," when we thought we had an opportunity right at hand, but it slipped through our fingers and disappeared. So it is apparent that these opportunities do not belong to us, but are God's property. They are given to us.

Now if we have proceeded accurately here we will see that the talents represent the opportunities that come to us, as professing Christians, to invest and utilize the natural abilities that God has given us, not on our behalf, but for Christ's sake. Those opportunities are the talents. Is that clear?

They are moments of fateful decision when we are confronted with the question of whether we are willing to invest our life and risk the loss of something we want, in order that God may have something he wants. That is the test.

Who has not faced the question at one time or another? Perhaps it was when you had to decide, "What shall I do with my life? What am I going to do with myself? What am I going to live for? To what purpose is my life to be put?"

You may now be facing the question, "Should I accept this offer to become a social worker down in the slums and help the underprivileged for the sake of Jesus Christ, or should I pursue my plan to be a rich lawyer and have all the luxury that goes with wealth?" That is a moment of opportunity, is it not?

Perhaps it is the question that may come to some of you, "Should I take Tuesday evenings to teach a home Bible class that will make demands upon me in terms of study and of giving of myself to propagate the truth of God, or should I go on spending Tuesday evenings with my friends bowling? I am not implying that bowling is wrong, but the question is, "How shall I invest my time?"

It may be the question, "Should I get involved in my neighbor's problems, which seem to be endless and never seem capable of solution? Should I try to help her with these difficulties, or should I take the same time for reading my Bible and praying and studying?" It is amazing how often these moments come and what fateful decisions they can be.

I know a Christian man whose declared ambition is to become the president of his company. Now there is nothing wrong with being the president of a company. But in order to fulfill that ambition he is required to move around to various cities. Whenever the opportunity for advancement has come, he has chosen to move and disrupt his family, tearing them out of relationships they were developing. As a result, he has lost his family. They have become rootless and, one by one, his children are forsaking the very things he wanted them to have and be.

That is the kind of decision we are talking about. It may come on moral issues. You may right now be battling the issue, "Should I yield to this situation in which I find myself, where I can indulge my passions and please certain of my friends and myself? Or should I be faithful to what I've been taught about sexual matters and resist this temptation and honor Christ?" That is the kind of an opportunity, a talent, that the Lord is talking about. Should I accept this promotion with its better salary but its insistence that I get involved in rather questionable ethics? Or should I pass it by and be content with the old car and the furniture we have now?

Whatever the decision may be, this is what Jesus is referring to. These opportunities to invest your life for his sake or save it for yourself are God-given opportunities which he provides. In that fateful moment we hang between heaven and hell, a moment of crisis and decision.

Now, our Lord goes on to show that a time of accounting must come:

"Now after a long time [Notice that? Here again is a clear-cut statement from the Lord Jesus that his coming would be long delayed] the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.' {Matt 25:19-21 RSV}

This first man has made 100% return on the opportunities, the talents, given to him.

In terms of the application of this to our own lives, it means that here is a man who made full use of his opportunities to risk himself for the Lord's sake. In other words, he put first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. He risked himself. He took the chance that he might never have the prominence or the influence or the power that he could have had, but instead he deliberately invested his life to give God what he wanted -- the binding up of the broken hearted, the healing of the sick, deliverance to captives, the setting free of those who were bound. As a result of this investing of himself, he won five more talents.

Now what are these talents?

Well, if the first talents are opportunities to use natural gifts for Christ's sake, then the second category of talents must likewise be opportunities, but opportunities on a higher level, not on the physical and natural, but on the spiritual level. These are opportunities to use the spiritual gifts that are given to you as redeemed men and women, given without exception to each and every Christian. It is the use of these gifts which translates your life into impact and power on behalf of Jesus Christ.

To this man the master said, "Well done, good and faithful servant." I know there is a common idea that every Christian will hear Jesus say, "Well done," when he gets to glory. I don't believe it. I do not think the Lord Jesus says "Well done," unless it has been well done. The Scriptures make clear that there is the possibility that though we may be in heaven with the Lord by virtue of his saving life and death, we do so as those who are "saved as though by fire" {cf, 1 Cor 3:15}, having lost much of the possibilities and potential of our lives. To that man the Lord will not say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

But in the parable he says, "Well done," and then he says, "Enter into the joy of your master." What is that joy? Remember in the book of Hebrews, Chapter 12, it is said of Jesus, "who, for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of God," {cf, Heb 12:2}. What is that joy, "the joy that was set before him"? You only need to read the gospels to see it. It is the joy of satisfying the heart of God. It is the joy of enduring blood, sweat, and tears, in order that a loved one may have his heart's desire. It is the joy of presenting a redeemed world to the Father. "Enter into the joy of your master." It is not merely a moment of glory. These joys are eternal joys -- they never lose their glory. This man enters into a joy that last forever.

Now, take the next man,

"And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me two talents; here I have made two talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.' {Matt 25:22-23 RSV}

This man only gained two talents. Is that 50%? No, that too is 100%. He gained as much, proportionately, as the one who had five to begin with. He is not as gifted as the other man, but he is equally committed, equally faithful. He has used his opportunities to the full. He has risked himself for the cause of Jesus Christ. To that man likewise the Lord says, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master." There is not one syllable of difference between what he says to the man with two talents and what he says to the man with five. We may think of Billy Graham and his

great worldwide ministry and the many gifts God has given him, and we tend to think that when the day of reward and accounting comes the Lord will say to a man like that, "Well done, enter in, I will set you over much." But for us, whom no one ever hears of, we will never hear words like that. But it is not so. On that day there will be some of whom no one has ever heard who will be equal with the prominent servants of God in the rewards they receive.

But now we come to the third man, and the heart of the parable.

"He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sowed and gather where I have not winnowed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to every one who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.'" {Matt 25:24-31 RSV}

Some may feel that the Lord is very harsh with this man, who at least had a sense of responsibility to see that his master got back what he had given him. But the key to this parable is contained in the phrase, "to him who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away." What does Jesus mean by that? This is a revelation of the basic purpose of life. This is why you are here. Fundamentally, God puts people into the world in order that they may increase, may grow. This is a fundamental law of life, is it not? If life does not increase and grow, it is not life; it is dead already. This is true of the plants in your yard. It is true of the animals around. It is true of you and me, as human beings, both physically and spiritually. It is the fundamental purpose of life. If there is no increase, no growth, then there is no reason to exist. That is what our Lord is saying. It is essential that life grow. And essential to the process of growth in man is redemption. How can you grow and fulfill your humanity unless you grow in the totality of your being -- body, soul, and spirit? And that is only possible to those who know Jesus Christ. It is he who makes possible the fulfillment of God's intention for man.

Thus this reveals to us the character of the one talent that is given to this man. What is its nature? It is the opportunity to be reborn, the opportunity to be redeemed. That is the talent given to anyone who comes under the hearing of the gospel, who in any sense becomes related to the Lord Jesus Christ as an outwardly professing Christian. He is given the opportunity to risk his life in commitment to the Lord Jesus. One supreme risk was possible to this man, and it was possible all during the time of his master's absence. But how did this man treat it? He buried it. That means he put it out of his sight. He did not want it facing him. He did not want to look at it. He did not want honestly to face the demands of that opportunity. He buried it in the ground and rejected it.

Then he prepared a little speech to justify it all when the Lord returned. When you read this, you can see that he has rehearsed it many times. He is all ready when the Lord returns. He says to him, in effect, "Look. When it all boils down to final things, it's your fault. I knew you, knew the kind of man you are. You're a hard, grasping individual. You expect people to do your dirty work for you, but you get all the benefits. You are unreasonable in your demands. If people don't come through with what you expect, you blame them for it. But I've outwitted you. I've got exactly what you gave me. Here it is. You and I are even."

Now, notice what the master says. He does not argue. He does not debate his own character with the man, he takes him at his own appraisal. Notice that Verse 26 ends in a question mark, and that is proper. "You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sowed, and gather where I have not winnowed?" He is not agreeing with the man. He is simply saying, "Is that what you thought of me? All right. Then, why didn't you act on that basis? If you thought that that is the kind of man I am, then surely you would know that not to invest this money at all would hardly be pleasing to me. If you really wanted to be pleasing to me -- in other words -- if you really wanted to be the servant you call yourself, then why didn't you at least put the money in the bank and let me have the interest when I returned?"

In those words, the Lord makes clear the real problem. The trouble is, this man did not intend to be a servant. He was not at all interested in his master's interests; he was interested in his own. He was taking the role of a servant, but he was unwilling to fulfill it. He was pretending to be what he was not. When the Lord returned, he simply revealed the hypocrisy of the man. Therefore he is justified in what he says, "Cast this worthless servant into outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth." He is a phony, and he is so revealed.

Now, what is the final message of this to us?

It is not only that we must be honest in grasping that one great opportunity that comes to any who sit under the hearing of the gospel -- to invest our life, to risk it for Christ's sake, but he is also saying to us, to those with five talents, or two talents, risk them! Live dangerously! Venture! Put your opportunities to work for my sake. Do not bottle up your life and try to hang on to it; lose it for Christ's sake. Give it up.

I believe that, perhaps as never before in our lifetime, we are facing times that demand this kind of living. The whole fabric of society is deteriorating before our very eyes. You know what has been happening in our own community. Forces of violence, unreason, and riot are taking over, and law and order seems to be able to do little about it. What does it mean?

Well, it means that the church, the salt in a community, is not acting as salt. It is trying to withdraw from life. It is not involving itself. It is contenting itself with having a way to heaven, and letting the rest of the world go to hell. As a result, life begins to crumble all around.

I believe we have reached a time when the necessity of risking, as our Lord sets forth here, is clearly before us all.

What do you do with your opportunities?

For whom are you living today? For your own interests, and the luxury and welfare of your family, or are you ready to risk something for Christ's sake?

Here is the opportunity around us with young people. As you know, drugs are invading this area. Right in this congregation, among the families represented here, there are young people using drugs. How do we answer that? Where is the truth that can open their eyes? Where is the proclamation of love, righteousness, and faith?

Why is it that, in spite of the mounting violence in our own community and the assurance that the Word of God gives that prayer is a mighty way of fighting back and controlling these forces, that there has not been an increase in attendance at prayer meetings?

Why is that? It is because we will not risk anything. We have reached the time when God is shaking us down, when we have to be real. We cannot go on playing church. We must be what God says we are and what we claim to be. That means that we must be involved in God's program, risking ourselves for his name's sake.

That is the story of the New Testament, is it not? With what joy these early disciples risked themselves. As the book of Hebrews put it, they "took joyfully the spoiling of their goods" {cf, Heb 10:34} in order that the cause of Jesus Christ might be advanced.

- We are in need of teachers, counselors for young people, those who will spend time and effort in reaching and loving some of these lost ones.
- We are in need of money for missions, for projects, for pressing programs.
- We are in need of the commitment of time, effort, and prayers.
- We need to be salt to arrest corruption.
- We need to put to work the gifts of the Spirit which are widely abundant in the congregation and yet which are not being used.

Now, thank God for every one who has been doing this.

I tell you, as a staff, it has been encouraging to us to see how many are waking up and beginning to discover the excitement of living as God intended life to be lived, and not wasting it on merely material ends. We are trying to put life back into focus, back into the perspective that Scripture gives. Thank God for those who are catching on, and demonstrating this kind of living. But, oh, there is need for so many more.

Here is the appeal of our Lord. Are you waiting for his return? Well then, are you ready to risk, for his name's sake?

With that question ringing in our ears, let us pray.

Prayer

Our dear Father, speak to us in this moment. Let your Word have its way with us, have its effect upon our lives. We ask you to heal our hearts, Lord, and straighten out our motives, and show us what we really are and what we are living for; what are the real goals and real gods in our lives. Commit us, Lord, to this one great cause which demands our time and effort, all the thrust and drive of our lives. How clear your word is in this respect. We are called "to present our bodies a living sacrifice, wholly acceptable unto God, which is our reasonable service." Lord, we pray we may do so in understanding that it is not our commitment that makes a difference, it is your power working through us. But it can only work through those who are committed to it. So grant to us increasing understanding and insight and a readiness to obey you in this respect. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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GOD AND THE UNTHINKING

by Ray C. Stedman

I would like to speak to you this morning as members of a persecuted minority. You know that professing Christians were once the majority in our country. Not too long ago more people were attending church than not. But no longer. Church attendance and interest are diminishing with the passing of this decade. Of course, true Christians never were the majority. They never have been, and never will be -- i.e., until the Lord returns -- and they never need to be. The character of Christian life is not that God wins his battles by majority vote. He wins them by the quality of life that is manifested. But we are very much aware that we are living today in an increasingly pagan world. Increasingly we are sensing and feeling how much more a minority Bible believing and trusting Christians are becoming in this day.

I think there is a tendency in all of us to write off this present world and age as hopeless. All these immoral, rebellious, shallow, superficial moderns who are around us everywhere today -- how disgusted God must be with these people.

Well, if that is how we feel, we are very, very wrong! We very much need correction by the message of the

parable now before us. It is the first of three which we might call "the parables of the lost things." They are found in Luke 15 -- one of the most familiar passages in the New Testament. We get the setting in which our Lord told them in the opening words of the chapter:

"Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him [Jesus]. And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'

"So he told them this parable:" {Luke 15:1-3 RSV}

The occasion, you notice, is the offense taken by the Pharisees at the crowd which was attracted to Jesus. They were, says Luke, tax collectors and sinners. That does not sound so terrible to us, though some of us may feel that the reaction of these Pharisees toward the tax collectors was somewhat justified. We are still suffering from April 15th, and, perhaps, feel that this hard-hearted, rigid lot ought to be treated with some contempt. But we ought to remember that tax collectors today are somewhat different from tax collectors then. They were not official servants of the government, like tax collectors today, but hired private entrepreneurs who made their money by overcharging and extortion. They had gained the reputation, quite deserved, of being venal -- exploiters, amassers of slush funds, and also spies for the Roman government. You can imagine how this kind was rejected by those around them. Today we would call them "loan sharks and finks." The sinners here were a motley group of various outcasts from society -- prostitutes, irreligious people who did not frequent the Jewish temple, thieves, gamblers, etc. Our terms today for this group would be "hippies and radicals."

So, here is a crowd of loan sharks and finks, hippies and radicals, all gathered around Jesus, listening to him. And the Pharisees objected. They did not object, particularly, to the fact that these people were listening to Jesus. What really bothered them was that some of this crowd were inviting Jesus home to dinner, and he was accepting! And so, with hands raised in horror, these Pharisees and scribes were saying, "This man receives these people and eats with them!"

We need to understand the viewpoint of these Pharisees somewhat sympathetically. There was much about Jesus that appealed to them. After all, they could see that he, like they, believed strongly in the existence of a supernatural kingdom, a spiritual kingdom over which God ruled in sovereign power and authority. He believed in the supernatural activity of God in the affairs of men and this warmed their hearts. And he, like they, honored the authority of the Word of God. Jesus never said one disparaging word or gave any hint that would weaken the authority of the Scriptures -- the Old Testament. The Pharisees gloried in the fact that they upheld the authority of the Word. They took it literally. They believed it. So they were attracted to Jesus on this basis also. Because they had these views in common, they expected him to join their club and to hold their attitude toward the outcasts from society.

But when Jesus saw their attitude of rejection toward these who were gathering around him, he told them these three parables. Each of these stories is about something lost. There are the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost sons. (Not son; sons. Both of them were lost.) And each of them reveals the heart of God, his attitude, and the activity that he undertakes on behalf of the lost. Each of them will help us to see men as God sees them, and to understand the reasons why they are lost.

With that as our introduction, let us look at the first of the stories our Lord told:

So he told them this parable: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." {Luke 15:3-7 RSV}

There are a number of clues in this story that will help us to interpret it. It may be somewhat difficult for us, who are city dwellers accustomed to a metropolitan area, to relate to this story from an agricultural-pastoral

region. Some of us are rather remote from this, although, as I have reminded you in the past, I come from Mont-a-a-na and I know a good deal about sheep -- lost and otherwise.

The first thing to grasp is the significance of the fact that our Lord chose a sheep and not a pig, cow, or dog. It was a lost sheep.

There is something unusual about sheep. Unlike other animals they do not often deliberately run away. A dog who wants to be free, given a chance, will leave, just like that. A pig or cow will do the same. But sheep do not. They only wander away. They do not mean to. They just drift away without realizing it. Thus Jesus has deliberately chosen an animal which represents people who are lost, but who never intended to be lost. They never meant to be, and they don't know how it happened. In complete sincerity of purpose they suddenly find themselves lost, and they do not know how it came about.

You can watch a sheep get himself lost. He is with the flock at first. Then he sees some grass a few paces away that interests him so he goes over to it. Then he sees some more in another few steps and moves to that. Then he finds more a little beyond. He is concerned only about the immediate, and, little by little, he is drawn away without realizing it. Suddenly he looks around for the flock, and finds they are nowhere in sight. He begins to bleat and run around, but he does not know in which direction to go, nor how to hide -- so he panics, he runs in circles. Every shepherd knows that a sheep in that condition is utterly helpless. Any wild animal, any hostile force, can take him easily.

This is the picture our Lord gives us of certain people who are intent only on the present experience. They are living just for the moment. They do not intend to get lost; they do not intend to waste their lives. They do not intend to wander off into something dangerous and destructive. But, little by little, concentrating only on the present, they wander away. Eventually they wake up to realize that they are lost, that life is suddenly empty, that their hearts are burdened and heavy with guilt -- and they do not know how it happened. They are not happy to be lost; they hate it. They long to belong. They may have wanted all along to be part of what God is doing, so they do not know how they got this way. They are exactly typified by this sheep.

There are millions like this today. Some are poor and obscure. Some are intent on simply making a living, on feeding themselves. That is all that concerns them. They live to eat and eat to live. Such a person has been described this way:

Into this world,
To eat and to sleep
And to know no reason
Why he was born,
Save to consume the corn,
Devour the cattle, flock, and fish,
And leave behind an empty dish.

Some are rich and prominent.

All over this country, and all over the world today, I see people suffering from what someone has aptly termed "destination sickness," i.e., the sickness of those who have already arrived at their destination, who have all that they set out to get in life. They have all they want; but they discover that they do not want anything they have. They have an empty life. That is destination sickness.

Our Lord is talking here about people who did not mean to be empty and hollow and heartsick, but who find that they are, and do not know how it happened.

This is the reason for much of the use of drugs by young people today. Not all who are using drugs are rebels. Not all of them are trying to protest something. They are simply drifting along with the crowd, or are intent upon some immediate experience. Sometimes they are kids who have grown up in homes devoid of love, and whose parents lead hollow lives -- this is a frequent pattern among drug users today. They will try anything because they want something, that is all, and they do not know where it is leading them.

A second key to this parable is the shepherd's response. He left the ninety and nine in the wilderness, Jesus said, and went after the one. That is most significant. It pictures the activity of God, as expressed in the person of the Lord Jesus himself. He left something to come and find us. As Paul states it so wonderfully in the letter to the Philippians, he did not count the fact that he was equal with God a thing to be held on to, but instead emptied himself, took upon himself the form of a servant, and was found in the likeness of men {cf, Phil 2:6-7}. He left, and he came. You can see how beautifully this is fulfilled in our Lord's own ministry.

Take his dealings with Matthew, for example. Remember that Matthew was a tax collector. He belonged to this crowd of extortionists who made their living by overcharging taxpayers, ruthlessly taking the last dime from poor people. He was one of the untouchables of his generation. He had full pockets, but an empty heart. But one day there stood before him a man whom he had seen and heard speaking, this man from Galilee, this stranger from Nazareth. Suddenly the man turned and looked at him, sitting there behind his table, with all his money around him. Those eyes looked into his eyes, and Matthew heard him speaking to him. He could not believe it -- that this man, who was obviously a prophet, should speak to him, an untouchable tax collector! To his astonishment he heard Jesus say, "Follow me," {Matt 9:9}. And Matthew just left all the money, stood up, and followed him. What he did next has always interested me. He came to Jesus and said, "Master, I have made a feast in my house for all my friends. Would you come?" And Jesus went. He went because there were gathered all the tax collectors that Matthew knew, ready to listen to him as he reached out to find these untouchables who were lost in the midst of plenty.

Our Lord intends that this should typify and describe those who are moved with compassion to meet the needs of the lost of this kind today. It is necessary, he says, to leave the ninety and nine, and to go out. You can never get this kind to come to church. They do not even know that there is anything worth coming to church for. And, of course, too often there is not. You must leave the safe place, the secure place, the comfortable place, and go out to find them. They are responsive, they are ready to be found, they do not resist when you find them. But this kind will never come to you.

That is why, from time to time, God lays his hand upon young people of this congregation and sends them out, out beyond the seas to people in other lands who are like the sheep in this story, who have drifted away, stumbled along, and found themselves lost. Some may even be savages in remote tribes, obscure people, forgotten people. The appeal of the Lord is, if you are going to reach this kind, that you be willing to leave something. You cannot merely stay in the comfortable place. Leave the ninety and nine, and go out to the campuses, to the beer halls and the cocktail parties, to the lonely offices and the servicemen's centers -- wherever this kind gather in their loneliness and lostness, trying to find something to satisfy the emptiness, to deaden the pain of an empty heart -- and there you will find them.

When you find them, says the Lord, lay them on your shoulders, as he did. What does that mean? It means help them, undertake for them, assume some care of them, share your strength with them. That is what this shepherd did. When he found the lost one he laid it on his shoulders and carried it, and went home rejoicing.

Some months ago I received a letter from a friend whom I had met last summer at a conference in the state of Washington. He told me of an unusual character whom he had met in the course of his work as a doctor. This person had been a member of the Norwegian Resistance to the Nazi occupation of Norway. He was a tough character. He had lived the rigorous, ruthless life of an underground commando. He was in this country trying to organize a program to challenge young people to get involved in wilderness survival training, to toughen them. But his own life was empty, his own heart hollow. In an attempt to satisfy it he had begun to drink and had become an alcoholic. Yet he was such a colorful character that he drew attention wherever he went. My friend sent me some newspaper clippings about him, described him to me, and said that he was moving to a town across San Francisco Bay from here. He asked me if I could do anything about reaching him.

I remembered a man whom I had known for a number of years who lived over there. He is an earnest, compassionate man, always reaching out to try to help those who are lost. I put all the information in an envelope and sent it to him. For weeks I heard nothing, but just two weeks ago he was here in this congregation. He told me what happened. He said that he had gone out after this man, and they had become friends. He found that, despite all the rough exterior, there was a very hungry heart underneath. And, in the

course of events, he led him to the Lord Jesus. The man became a Christian and was delivered from his alcoholism. He was restored to his wife. And we have been invited to supply counselors for the camp that he is establishing up in the Sierra. He wants only Christian young men and women to work with him there. What an example of this kind of ministry -- of reaching out to those who are lost.

A third key in this parable is the emphasis on the rejoicing over the recovery of the lost. Our Lord says,

"And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." {Luke 15:6-7 RSV}

This reveals the value that God sets on lost men and women. They are not worthless in his sight. They are not written off, nor neglected. They are made in his image. That is the declaration of Scripture. Therefore they are of unspeakable value to God. They bear his own mark, marred, defiled, and ruined as that image may be, and he longs to find them and reach them and restore them. Notice the remarkable way our Lord expresses God's joy, here:

"Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." {Luke 15:7 RSV}

For years I accepted the usual interpretation of that last phrase. It is that our Lord was referring to these Pharisees as the ninety and nine -- these righteous persons who thought that they did not need any repentance -- who actually did, but did not know it. But the more I have studied this parable, the less I feel that is correct. Jesus deliberately says that these ninety-nine are people who do not need any repentance. He did not say that they merely thought they didn't; they actually don't! Well, if ninety-nine people do not need repentance, why do they not? It must be because they have already repented. There is only one way to be righteous and that is to have repented, to have turned to the One who alone can give us righteousness. Righteousness is the gift of God. We know that from Scripture. No man can earn it, no man can buy it, no man can achieve it. There is no religious formula you can go through that will make it available to you. It is a gift given only to those who have repented and have cast themselves upon the grace of God.

So here are ninety-nine people who have done that. Now, does God not have joy over them? Of course he does. He rejoices greatly. He takes great delight in those who are his. You only have to read the Scriptures to see how God's concern is for his own, how he loves them, nourishes them, is tender toward them. As a Father he pities them and trains them, disciplines them and works with them, and rejoices over them. Yes, Jesus is not deprecating the joy that God has for these; he is simply saying that if God rejoices over those who are already his that still doesn't compare with how he feels when one of these lost people repents and turns to him. You cannot imagine the joy that breaks out in heaven when that happens! God is so desirous of setting men free from the things that blast and ruin them, disfigure and destroy them that, when he can accomplish it by the great work he has performed, heaven just erupts into cheering, and they shoot off fireworks and have a tremendous celebration! That is how much God is concerned about the lost, and that is what our Lord wants us to see.

If we Christians can live on the face of this planet and can look at a world as lost as this world is -- with its millions around us whose hearts are empty, hollow, and bleeding, and who did not mean to get lost anymore than we had meant to before we were found -- and not feel some of the same compassion as the God who longs to reach them, then there is something wrong with us. But if we enter into God's compassion, then our hearts will begin to burn with a hunger to do something for these poor, lost people whom Jesus described as being like sheep without a shepherd, wandering in the wilderness of life with no guide nor guideline, simply existing, with no destiny except death at last. The wonderful thing is that when you are concerned, and involve yourself in the great enterprise of God to find this kind of people, then you do find them. God will lead you to one, and your own heart can share something of the joy of God over their repentance.

In the course of my experience as a pastor, I have seen it happen many times:

Many of you have told me, with your face literally radiating glory, about an experience you have had with your neighbor or friend or co-worker. You have been able to lead them to Christ. You have found them lost and have led them to him. You have rejoiced over it.

Recently my daughter, Sheila, came home and she was radiant. As she walked into the house she said, "Oh, Dad, the most exciting thing happened!" She told me of how she had been driving home from the Young Life Camp at Woodleaf, and had brought with her a girl who had not known the Lord. As they were driving along they were talking about him, and the girl suddenly said to her, "Sheila, pull over to the side of the road, will you? I want to receive the Lord." And she led her to Christ. That girl is here with her this morning. And I sensed and shared with my daughter the joy in heaven among the angels and in the heart of God, and in all those who see life as it really is, when one lost person turns to Jesus Christ.

Prayer

Thank you, our heavenly Father, for this glimpse into your own heart, for the knowledge of your concern for those who are drifting and aimless, who have no goals in life. There may be some among us here this morning who have been brought by those who have found them. We pray that they may now, by faith, lay hold of this blessed Redeemer, this Shepherd, and let him lift them up and hold them to himself, lay them on his shoulder, and bring them home with rejoicing. We ask in his name, Amen.

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GOD AND THE NEGLECTED

by Ray C. Stedman

The parables of our Lord are remarkable stories which he so wonderfully told on many different occasions. They intrigue and challenge us for they always have an element of mystery about them; they constitute a delightful, tantalizing challenge to us to discover the hidden truth that he has incorporated in them. We are studying the series of parables recorded in the fifteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel. These are parables of lost things and they grew out of an incident when the Lord was surrounded by a crowd made up of loan sharks, hippies, and radicals. Of course, the Scriptures do not call them that. There they are referred to as tax collectors and sinners. But these are the modern equivalents. They were listening eagerly to what he had to say. They even invited him home to dinner and he accepted.

But the Pharisees and the scribes objected very strenuously to our Lord's fellowshiping with these people; in their self-righteous egotism, they criticized him severely for it. They murmured against him, saying that he was demeaning himself by eating with tax collectors and sinners. To answer this charge our Lord gave three parables. Each of them is a picture primarily intended to illustrate the joy in the heart of God when someone who was lost is found.

In the process of telling these stories our Lord reveals the four kinds of lostness that prevail among men. Last week we looked together at the parable of the lost sheep. There we learned that men can be lost because of

unthinking ignorance. They become preoccupied with life, drifting away without intending to do so. There is no rebellion, no intent to be lost, but they simply wake up to find that life has moved them away from where they ought to be, and so they find themselves lost.

Today we have the parable of the lost coin, the second in this series, found in Verses 8-10:

"Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." {Luke 15:8-10 RSV}

There are three very revealing movements in this little story:

The first is the circumstance of the lost coin. The coin referred to here is a small silver piece worth, in our money, about 16 cents. The lady had ten of these, so the total value of her wealth was \$1.60. That is not very much, but it was more than simply some money to this woman because it had great sentimental value. We learn from those who have studied the customs of ancient days that this was part of her dowry.

When a woman married she took money that she had accumulated throughout her life and sewed it into a headdress which she wore on her wedding day. She used ten silver coins -- which is why our Lord picked this number to illustrate the story. Therefore these ten coins were of tremendous significance to her as a woman. They symbolized her dowry. They represented not just the value of the money, but all that she had to contribute to the marriage. This headdress was of such value to the women of that time that, by law, it was impossible for it to be taken from them -- even to pay a debt.

I have often thought that these Eastern customs of marriage were much more sensible than ours. We can see Western degeneracy in the fact that now the father of the bride must pay all the costs of a wedding. It was much better in the East where the women needed to contribute only this little bit. The bridegroom paid everything else. As the father of four daughters I should like very much to reintroduce these customs into our modern scene!

The point of the illustration that the Lord is giving here is that something was lost -- but lost at home. The value of the story of the lost sheep is that, though the sheep did not mean to, it had wandered away and the shepherd had to leave the ninety and nine to go out and find it. Similarly, the value of this illustration is that the coin was lost at home where you would not expect to find lost things. This coin did not wander off. It was in the place of apparent safety. Nevertheless it was lost -- probably through carelessness or neglect, although nothing is said about the cause. It may have been by some accident. The woman is unaware that the coin is lost until suddenly she discovers that it is gone. When she wakes up to realize that the coin is missing she is stirred to a flurry of activity to recover it because it is of extreme value to her. That is the story, and our Lord intended it to hit with impact on those who heard.

It has meaning to us today only as we apply it to our own situation. It forces upon us the question, "Do I have something lost at home?" Perhaps better, "Is someone lost?" -- because our Lord is not talking about things but is illustrating the value of lost persons. Is someone lost in your home -- a child, perhaps, that you have taken for granted is a Christian, but, as he grows up, something makes you realize that he is not? You may wake up to realize that these whom you have taken for granted to be safe and sound in your home are not; they are lost.

There are millions like this today in Christian homes -- many even in this congregation. We have raised them in our Christian homes. We have taught them the Scriptures as best we knew how. We have helped them to memorize Scripture. We have taught them how to know the Lord, and how to walk with him. But, as they grow up, if we are honest, observant, and sensitive as parents, there may come a time when, in the absence of any positive evidence to the contrary, we must face the realization that these children are not really saved, are not Christians, are not born again. They are lost -- and lost at home.

This is a frequent occurrence because we parents tend to put too much trust in externals. I have long ago

learned not to trust the fact that a child has made any sort of public profession of becoming a Christian as evidence that he has actually become a real Christian. Many people have held evangelistic meetings for them, and children have raised their hands, and confessed faith in Christ. The parents have naively assumed that these children have really become Christians. But we need to understand that we cannot impose adult standards of commitment upon children, because they are born imitators. You can have a meeting with five hundred children you gather right off the streets. If you have presented something interesting and fascinating, and they have been caught up in the flow of the program, you may make an appeal to them at the end of it, and they will do whatever you ask. But that does not mean they have actually been changed. To assume so is the mistake many Christian parents make.

I frequently meet children who have come through this system and have grown up into adults. Their parents have assumed, because they were obedient to attend Sunday school and to go with them to church, that they had become Christians. But actually they never made an inner commitment of the heart, and the children have grown up without a real knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

One of our Sunday school teachers was saying to me just this morning that he had been asking his class some questions about the Bible. As long as they concerned mere information the students were all responsive. But when he began to probe their inner lives and their inner reaction and response to the person of Christ, he found that they had hardly anything to say. They did not know anything. There was no genuine experience of the reality of the Lord Jesus.

I do not know how many times I have heard someone say, "When I was a kid my folks made me go to Sunday school, and I went all my life. I won all the medals and prizes for attendance. But, as soon as I got out on my own, I quit and I've never gone back. It never meant anything to me."

That is the situation our Lord is describing here. One is lost, and lost at home.

The second movement of our story takes us immediately into the efforts of this woman to find what was lost. She launched upon a remarkable campaign. When she realized that this valuable coin was lost, she went into action. Her activity in this story reveals the heart concern of God for people who are lost like this. God's heart moves out to them. Also revealed is the process of recovering such lost people. I am sure every parent will be interested in what follows.

This woman did three things which are extremely important:

First, she lit a lamp. That is what to do before anything else. She realized that she was working in darkness. She needed more light in this search. I think you see how clear the symbolism is. If we are going to find those lost at home, we are going to need the light of the Scriptures. We need to understand how God works, and how children operate. There is only one source in the world where we can get that information accurately, and in a trustworthy way, and that is from the Scriptures. So we need to light the lamp of Scripture when we realize that our children do not know Jesus Christ.

This woman felt she needed light, as we must feel the need of learning more of reality. I am sure you know how this feels. There is not a parent here who has not felt his ignorance in confronting this kind of situation, and sensed how little he understands children. How much we need to understand what a child thinks, how he thinks, and how to approach him about God.

There is no book greater than the Bible to consult for that. The New Testament and the Old alike are full of passages that deal with the problem of reaching children. Nothing is more important in this connection than the book of Proverbs. Proverbs is the record of the talks of a father with his son, and of how a father begins early in the life of his son to lay the foundation that will lead that boy to the fullness of manhood, in an experience of trust in the living God. There are books and passages in the New Testament also that deal with how to approach a child, and, furthermore, how to recognize true life.

The problem is that there are many parents who do not understand how to recognize the signs of a genuine impartation of life in Jesus Christ. They have taken the word of a child, or the expression of his experience, as

the ground of salvation. I have known parents, and mothers particularly, who were so confused about this that even when their children had grown up and obviously had left the path of any possible testimony of Christian faith -- had flung their faith overboard and openly displayed indifference and unconcern for the things of God -- these parents had come to me and said, "I know he's a Christian, because when he was five years old he received the Lord Jesus." But that is fooling yourself. That is no sign at all.

The Scriptures tell us that if the Spirit of God is at work in the heart, there will be evidence of it. As John tells us in his first letter, "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren," {1 Jn 3:14 RSV}. Love awakening for other Christians is one sign. Paul says, "Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity," {2 Tim 2:19b KJV}. A desire to turn from that which is obviously evil is another sign. There are other indications of the fruit of the Spirit throughout the Scriptures. These are what we must learn if we are going to evaluate our children rightly.

Not only that, but we must also learn how to strengthen and nurture the life that is already there, so that it grows as the child grows and moves into adulthood, so that it begins to blossom and flower and to produce Christian character and a Christian life.

Second, this woman swept the house. In those days it was customary to spread straw on the floor. Usually the floors were earthen and, in order to have something soft underfoot, straw was spread. A coin falling down in it would naturally be difficult to find. So the woman took a broom and swept up all the straw and thus made it much more possible to find it.

What does this symbolize to us? You can see clearly that it indicates a need to lay bare the circumstances of the family, to open up and to be transparent and honest within the family circle. There is a need to admit fault -- to admit both the possibility of failure and its actual occurrence on the part of parents toward children, if it is true. There is a need to let your children see that you are not perfect, and are not claiming to be perfect, as parents. You must admit, as freely as you expect them to admit, the mistakes that you make and the errors that you have fallen into. This is what makes possible the finding of lost ones.

I know that is not easy to do. Something about being adults appeals to our pride, and we love to preserve an air of infallibility with regard to our children. When they are little, they think that we hung the moon in place. They think that mother and dad know all the answers, that there is nothing hidden from them, that they know everything. But as they grow up we have to dispossess them of that delusion. To continue it is easy because we enjoy that feeling. We feel great that our children think we are so tremendous. But nothing is more dangerous than to let them grow up continuing to believe that we think that of ourselves. Parents need to unburden themselves and admit their problems.

I must confess to you that there is nothing more difficult in a pastor's household than for the pastor to admit that he is wrong. He has not only his whole family thinking that he knows everything, but half the church does, too. And for him to have to say to his children, "I'm sorry, I made a mistake," is a hard thing to do. But I have had to do it, and I hope you will do it, too, because nothing will contribute more in a household to laying the groundwork of reality in the Christian faith, than to have the parents open up and be honest and transparent in their problems with their youngsters.

The third thing this woman did was to search diligently. She lit a lamp; she swept the house; and she searched diligently. That means she thought about ways of finding this coin. She gave herself to this task. She did not just look around a little in her spare time; she stopped everything and she swept the house out. Foot by foot she went over the floor, searching for this lost coin -- it was that valuable to her.

The symbolism and the application in our own lives again is quite clear. Parent after parent has told me, "If I only realized how important it was to have given some time to my children when they were growing up. But I was caught up in the business of making money. I thought it was so important to get ahead. I thought it was essential to have all the nice things that the neighbors had. I was so intent on making enough money to buy a new car, or another television set, or to get a cabin in the mountains. Now I realize that if I had only given some time to my children how much more valuable that would have been!" And so the analogy here, our Lord teaches, is to someone who immediately stops everything and takes the time to know and to love his children,

until they open up, until a response is obtained, until there are communication channels open, and it is thus possible to reach and to find that which was lost.

I do not have to dwell upon this. I know you are hearing it from many sides today. But this lack of proper attention is the reason why so many of our young people are drifting away. So many of them have no confidence in the older generation because they feel that adults do not know them. Parents are caught up in their own affairs while their children run around the streets without any supervision, without their parents knowing or caring where they have been or what they are doing. I see this in my own neighborhood and everywhere I go. But this must not be true among Christians. For, if we have a concern for our children and desire to see them one with God, we must realize the great possibility that they can be lost right at home.

The third movement of the story brings us at last to finding and rejoicing:

"And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." {Luke 15:9-10 RSV}

Speaking as a father I can tell you that there is nothing more satisfying than to find your children growing up into solid, trustworthy, Christian maturity. There is nothing that warms the heart more than to see the evidences of faith, the warmth of Christian love, and depth of Christian commitment in the heart of one of your own children. Remember what John writes in his third letter, saying what every father can echo: "No greater joy can I have than this, to hear that my children follow the truth," {3 Jn 1:4 RSV}. That is joy. The poet, Edgar A. Guest, said:

If I don't help my boy to grow up right, I'll call myself a failure no matter how much money I make or how big a reputation I get. I have a number of tasks to do all of which I should like to do well. To be a failure in any one of them would be disappointing. Yet I could bear that without whimpering if I were sure I had not failed my boy. Not so much of me in the bank, and more of me and my best in the lad -- that's what I should like to have to show at the end of my career. For me to succeed as a father, he must succeed. Unless my boy comes to manhood fit for the respect of his fellow men, I shall have been a failure. The glory of our handiwork lies not in ourselves, but in our children.

So our Lord described the joy that was in the heart of this woman when she found this coin which was lost. She called all her neighbors and friends to share with her this overwhelming joy. And you know, despite all the problems that may come in the raising of children, despite the battles, the failures, the tears, the heartaches -- if, as you see them coming to manhood and womanhood, they have struck deep roots down into the depths of Christian truth, and have come to understand and to know the Lord Jesus as a living, vital factor in their life, and have begun, somewhat feebly perhaps, but have begun at least, to rest upon his forgiving grace and to understand his overwhelming love, to understand how to walk with him and to draw strength from him, and to encounter the battles and the difficulties of life with the courage and strength which he alone can impart, then it does not make any difference what all the difficulties, problems, and heartaches were. Your own heart will be filled with this kind of joy as you see them entering life committed, concerned, growing, settled in faith, solid and secure.

And Jesus said that joy is shared in heaven, as well. The angels glory before God, he said. There is a celebration in heaven when one of these who are lost at home opens up his or her heart and finds a living Lord. He likens it to the celebration that was held when the lost sheep was found. It is a superlative expression. They shoot off cannons, they ring bells, they swing from the chandeliers. It is a great time of unrestrained joy before God over a lost one that is returned.

What a revelation of the heart of God this is! How God longs to see those who are lost recovered, whether they have wandered away, or whether they are lost at home where it had seemed that they had been in a place of safety. Yet all of us know of instance after instance of those who have been raised in Christian homes, but who have been lost all the time.

God help us to face this with the realism of the whole picture of our Lord's parable, that we might stop and take the steps that are necessary to find these that are lost at home, before it is too late.

Prayer

Our Father, we pray that our own hearts may be filled with the joy that is described in this parable, as we look forward to the time when our children move into adulthood and take on the responsibilities of Christian adults. We pray that you will help us to be realistic and honest about them. We realize that for a child to find Christ is the easiest possible thing, when the approach is right. As you yourself have said, Lord Jesus, except that we become like a little child, no one of us can come into the kingdom of heaven. And if our lives and our approach are right, all of these children can find you, for that is not difficult for a child. We ask you that you will lay this on our hearts, and teach us to be good parents. And for those of us who have children who are now entering adulthood, we pray that we may be tender and responsive, ready to admit our mistakes and our failures, and ready not to blame the children but to help them in every way that we can. In these days of pressures and problems we pray, Lord, for the wisdom to lead them aright. In Christ's name, Amen.

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GOD AND THE REBELLIOUS

by Ray C. Stedman

The parable of the lost son is the most famous of all our Lord's illustrations. Probably no parable our Lord ever uttered is more pertinent to the times in which we live than this, the story of a rebellious boy. Each day we are confronted with new crises arising from what is called "the rebellious generation." Every news medium flashes before us reports of the insistent demands of the young for "Freedom, now!" We hear on every side the cry for the overthrow of old ways, the call for the destruction of the establishment, and a summons to defiance of all authority. Many workers from college campuses reported to me this past week what the radical elements on the campuses are saying. They are openly advocating that students pay no attention to anything they have learned from their parents. They tell them that parents are completely and totally wrong and urge them not even to bother to tell parents they are wrong but just to ignore them. Our present generation, perhaps more than any for many centuries, is under tremendous pressure to flaunt authority, to overthrow the old ways, to rebel against parental authority, and to destroy the landmarks of the past.

There is no better place in the world to discuss this kind of problem than right here. This is where it ought to be faced. In a congregation of the Church of Jesus Christ all kinds of people are present: the young, the old, the weak, the strong, the rich, the poor, all colors, all backgrounds, all experiences of life. We gather here not to air our own points of view but to listen to God's viewpoint. Some of the young present are sympathetic with what is going on today -- and not without good reason. Some of us who are older likewise have sympathy for it, yet we feel also a sense of fear and dread of the possibilities that might result from the revolt that seethes beneath the surface of the cities of our land. There is no one here who cannot but be helped by seeing the rebellious as God sees them. That is what this parable brings before us.

This parable falls into three movements. There is, first, the departure of the son; then his awakening in the far

country; and finally, the joy of the father. Now the first movement,

And he said, "There was a man who had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything." {Luke 15:11-16 RSV}

In this section of the story, Jesus deliberately sets before us two remarkable things. One is the freedom this young man sought, and the other is the freedom he actually found. There is not one of us who does not know how this young man felt while he was living at home. We all know the sense of oppressive authority and the revolt that seethes within against it. We have all had a sense of being held down, restrained, under leash. In the innocent conceit of youth, it is easy for this young man to think that he has already arrived at the place where he is able to handle his own affairs fully and completely. He was undoubtedly approaching that time and he chafes under the restraint of his father, murmuring and grumbling to himself.

It is clear that this boy's idea of freedom is that of so many young people today -- the opportunity to do what you want to do. You can almost hear what he says to himself, "Oh, if I could just go where I want to go and do what I want to do, to go and come back as I please, and not have to answer to anyone. If I could just let my passions have their fling and satisfy myself whenever I like and not be under any law or any rules. If I could be my own boss, and answer to no one. What a great life that would be!" Further, his thought would be, "Why wait for it? It's going to come sometime soon anyhow. Soon I'll be on my own; soon I'll make my own decisions, so why wait? Why not now?"

So he came to his father and said, "Father, you know that soon I'm going to be of age. You've already told me that when I come of age you'll give me a share of your property. But I want it now. Give me the share that belongs to me, and let me take it now." Doubtless his father tried to reason with him. He said to him, "Son, do you really think you have no freedom now? Don't you see that you have a great deal of freedom? Plenty of it? Can't you see that I've given you a great deal of responsibility, and there is much more to come? And don't you understand that you have the run of the house and all this property, and that you are answerable in this home only to me? You don't need to report to anyone else; there is only one to whom you are under obligation."

But it is all to no avail. The boy is determined to have his way. So at last the father gives him his share of the property, and the boy gathers up all his possessions and takes his way into the far country. At first he is sure that he has done the right thing. He rents a home with a great view, and furnishes it with taste. He begins to make friends everywhere, of both sexes. He spends money with a lavish hand, and tries anything and everything, especially those things which had formerly been forbidden him.

Strangely enough, soon everything seems to be mysteriously changed. His body becomes the vehicle of wild passions that sometimes frighten him with their intensity. His health begins to suffer, and he finds that he often wakes up with a dark brown taste in his mouth. He no longer feels vital and alive as he once did. His money begins to dwindle and with it his friends go. He is no longer able to keep up with the expensive crowd he first chose. They leave him in the lurch as soon as his money is gone, and he must seek other friends. He finds that he cannot stand to be alone but must always find some amusement or diversion.

At last hard times hit the country. His money is gone, and now he has to get a job. But because he had not stayed with his father long enough to complete any skill or training, the only job he can get is manual labor, and even that is hard to find. Finally he ends up with a job feeding pigs. There, in the pigsty with an empty purse and an empty belly, he begins to take stock of his empty life.

That brings us to the second movement of the story:

"But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants."' And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'" {Luke 15:17-21 RSV}

Perhaps the most hopeful sentence in this story is the phrase with which this section is introduced, "But when he came to himself." (Years ago I heard a very eloquent black preacher speaking on this parable. He was illustrating what happened to the prodigal son in the far country. He said, "As his money disappeared he had to sell his clothes in order to eat. He took off his shoes and sold those. Then he took off his coat and sold that. Then he took off his shirt and sold that. And then he came to himself!")

Our Lord is saying that no one who is in rebellion is ever himself. He is living in a dream world, a world of fantasy, unreality. But now at last the boy begins to see himself exactly as he is. Reality breaks through. When he takes stock of his life he discovers that his is chained to his urges. His passions have so developed within him that he has to satisfy them in any way he can. Yet even when he does so, they are not satisfied.

A high school boy said to me some time ago, "I don't know what's the matter with me. I see a girl, and I say to myself, 'If I could just go with that girl, I'd be the happiest guy on earth!' And then I meet her, and go out with her. We go together for awhile, and then I find myself saying, 'If I could just get rid of this girl I'd be the happiest guy on earth!'"

In our story the boy finds that he is chained to his homesickness. He cannot forget his home, so he must keep himself amused and diverted, his attention engaged. He cannot stand to be alone. Every time he comes into the house he switches on the TV or the radio, anything to keep him occupied. He finds he is chained to his degrading work. He does not like it; he hates it. There is nothing appealing about it, nothing challenging in it, but it is all he has to keep himself alive, and he has got to stay with it. He must do something to live. Further, he finds himself subject to a man who cares nothing about him, who uses him as a mere tool to get his work done, but has no interest in him as a person.

One day the realization hits him with full force. If he cannot avoid certain things, but must do other things, then he is no longer free! Above everything else he wanted to be free. He sought for freedom and longed to find it, was ready to sacrifice anything to gain it. Now he knows that he is the least free of all men. And he suddenly realizes that this has been true for a long time; he knew it inwardly even when he still had money. Others thought he was carefree, able to do what he wanted, but inside he knew that the chains were beginning to draw around him and his freedom was a lie. That was his first realization, that he had no freedom at all.

Second, as he sat among the pigs in the pigsty, he realized that all the things that he once had, he had gotten from his father. His possessions, his money, his clothes, his food, his drink, even his very body, the passions of which he had unleashed. He had gotten them all from him. He had been living on the capital of another, and had made no investment himself.

Then a third thing hit him. He realized that everything he now wanted -- even needed -- was to be found only in the father's house. That is where true freedom lay. As he looked back on those days with his father, he realized that there was freedom. That was when he was the most free. That was when he could be what he wanted to be. That was when he could fulfill the dreams of his heart, and when he still had his health and his chastity. And even now the things he wanted and needed were in the father's house. He yearned for food, for he was hungry, but the only place he knew where he could get it was in the father's house. He yearned for friends and for companionship. He was all alone and no one gave him anything; but there it all was, waiting in the father's house. He yearned for significance, for some way to redeem his ruined life. The only chance he could think of was to go back to his father.

The fourth thing that came to him, as he sat in the pigsty, was that he had lost all claim upon his father. He

could not go back after he had been so smart, so sure that he was right, and say to his father, "Father, I've come back to be your son." He realized he had lost his right to sonship. So he thought up a little speech that he would make. Jesus tells us what it is: He said to himself, "I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.'" He reasoned, "Even the hired servants in my father's house have something to eat, and they have spare time in which to enjoy themselves. They're better off than I by a long ways. I haven't the gall to go back to be my father's son again, but I'll go back and be his hired servant." So he rose to return to the father.

Now this last realization to which he came is really very important. There are some who have suggested that this boy need not have come back saying what he said; that he could have come back and said to his father, "Father, here I am, and you ought to be glad I went for I grew more mature in the far country. The experience of evil which I've been through has made a man of me. Now I've come back to be your son, and you can be glad that I tried the far country." One writer even goes so far as to suggest that he urge his older brother to go to the far country, that he might sin a bit and thus grow up to be a man! But you find that there is nothing of that here; nothing at all.

I am sure that if this boy had said that, the father would have still welcomed him back. The father loved this boy, and he would have still put on him the robe, the ring, and called for the fatted calf. But the problem would have been the son would have been unable to forgive himself. The torments inside would have remained. His conscience would have gone on accusing him, and, wracked with guilt, he could not have assumed again the position of a son.

I run into many people like that. They have never been able to forgive themselves because they have never taken the position this boy took. They have never realized that they have no claim whatsoever upon God, upon his love or grace.

That is why Jesus tells us this story. He wants us to see how this boy is set completely free. When he comes back to the father, he comes without any justification whatsoever. There is simply the acknowledgment that he has no claim and that all is up to the father.

Then we come to the third movement of the story:

"But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry." {Luke 15:22-24 RSV}

Here is the joy of the father. What a happy note to end on -- for everyone but the fatted calf!

The father's joy is unrestrained. He sees the lone figure on the horizon and runs to meet him. He throws his arms about him and kisses him. The boy starts his little speech, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." The father knows what he is going to say next and he stops him, does not let him say it, but cries, "Bring quickly the best robe -- and a ring -- and prepare the fatted calf." He calls for the robe, the mark of sonship. He calls for a ring, the sign of authority. And he calls for a feast, the display of honor. In other words he puts this boy right back into the full relationship of a son within the family circle. He begins to honor him and treat him as a grown son.

Now, how can this father be so joyful? There were many years in my life when I read this parable and could understand fully the feeling of this boy. I too had been a rebellious son, and I knew how he felt; I could identify with him. I knew what the far country was like, and what the joy of coming home was. But now, as I read the parable, I find myself identifying with the father and understanding something of what went on in his heart. Why is this father so joyful, why is he so gloriously happy? It is as he tells us. It is because, in his thinking, the boy had been dead -- but now is alive. He was lost -- but now is found. He had almost given up, he had almost lost hope. These words tell us that behind the joy of the father is the dark background of agony which he endured while this boy was gone.

Dr. Helmut Thielicke's title for his commentary on this parable is not "The Prodigal Son," as we call it, but "The Waiting Father." Many of the commentaries point out that what Jesus is after is not to show us the boy's heart, but the father's. It is a picture of the heart of God.

The father's agony began when he first realized that he had to let this boy go. He did not want to. He knew what lay ahead, and he knew it was needless. He knew that he could have spared this boy the heartache, the loneliness, the shame and degradation of the far country; that he could have saved him from these black marks upon his soul. Had the boy been patient, and waited a bit, and allowed his father to work out his purposes, he could have brought him into the full enjoyment of the liberty he sought, but without the heartache, without the shame. Yet the father knew he could not do it without the boy's full cooperation, that, when he had reached this stage of development, the boy must cooperate with him in it. He had to wait, and agree to wait, through the fulfillment of the father's plans. But if he would not wait the father could not force him; he could not make him do it. So there came a time when, with his heart breaking, the father gave the boy the money and let him go.

Then there followed long months and years when reports came filtering back from the far country of what was happening. The older boy heard them also and flings them in the father's face a little later. Every bit of gossip was like a knife wound in the father's heart. His own son, in this kind of state! Each day deepened the ache in his heart, but he never fully gave up looking for him. Though he finally reached the place where he thought the boy would never come back, something within him kept his eyes on the horizon, though every look was a pain, and every pain left a scar.

If we can see the father's agony as Jesus intended us to see it, then we will have the answer to the question many ask about this parable. They say, "Why is there no reference here to the cross? How can Jesus tell the story of a rebellious son, a prodigal boy returning to his father, without a single reference to his own cross and his redemptive love?" The answer is that the agony of this father's heart, running through the background of this story, unexpressed but clearly there, is the picture of the cross. The cross is the expression of God's agony over the rebellion of man. That is what Paul says in Romans 5, "The proof of God's amazing love is this, that when we were yet sinners Christ died for us," {cf, Rom 5:8}. Again, to the Corinthians, he says, "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself," {2 Cor 5:19 KJV}.

There is a mistaken doctrine of the atonement which says that Jesus, upon the cross, was placating the vengeance of an angry God; that he was standing between the poured out wrath of God and man, stopping God from wreaking terrible vengeance upon the rebellion of man. There is some truth in that for it is true that God's justice must be satisfied. But we can never understand the depths of the atonement unless we realize that God's love was expressed in the cross, that God was "in Christ, reconciling the world." Behind the reconciliation is the ache and agony of a Father's heart. "He who spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all; how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" {cf, Rom 8:32}. Is that not the story of the prodigal son?

The final lesson of this story is that there is a new beginning that awaits us in God. There is a full restoration that is ours whenever we stupidly and foolishly rebel. There is not one person here who has not so rebelled and does so even yet. But restoration is only because the Father has already borne the hurt himself. The agony has already reached him. He has quenched the fire of our rebellion in the blood of his Father's heart.

You and I know that we are rebels. There is not one of us who can point the finger at another. We all rebel. We rebel in hypocrisy and cover it over with self-righteousness. We act as though we are good and decent and respectable, but if we admitted the truth, inside there is defiance and flaunting and desiring our own way. We take matters in our own hands and go off into some far country of the spirit. How many times God has healed us and welcomed us back without a word of condemnation. When we have come, saying, "Father, we are not worthy to be your sons. We don't deserve your love and your mercy," he never lets us finish the sentence. Instead, he calls for the restoration of all that was ours, all that he wanted us to have -- the ring, the robe, and the merry feast.

So we cannot point our finger at anyone who lives in rebellion against God. We can only say of them, "They

are our kind of people." We can only help them find their way back from the far country. We know well the loneliness of it. We know the agony of it, the heartache of it. We know the emptiness and the longing for significance and love and grace. But this is the message Jesus wants us to learn, and what we are to convey to the world around us -- that God waits to restore fully those who turn back to him.

Those who come like this boy, saying, "Father, I've blown it. I've messed it up. Lord, I don't know how to straighten it out. but you know, and I can only commit myself to you." To that, the Lord Jesus makes clear, God responds as this father did.

Prayer

Our Father, how grateful we are that through the difficulties of our lives and through the clarity of Scripture you are teaching us that we have only two choices: either to be the slave of one master, or the child of another. We pray that in each moment of decision we may choose to be the child of a father's love. We are not made to stand alone. No one is. We cannot run our own affairs. We are dishonest if we think we can. We are dependent upon you, Lord. We have made us that way, and now we glory in it. We ask you to break the back of rebellion within us, and help us to choose your plan and your program. To learn to wait when you ask us to, and learn to trust, and know that "freedom, now," means slavery; but freedom when you give it means liberty in the fullest sense of the word. We thank you for this lesson, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: God and the Rebellious
Series: Treasures of the Parables of Jesus
Scripture: Luke 15:11-24
Message No: 6
Catalog No: 376
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GOD AND THE RESPECTABLE

by Ray C. Stedman

It is more than coincidental that on this Father's Day we are discussing a parable from Luke's Gospel which reveals the fatherhood of God and is one of the greatest parables in the Scriptures to picture a father's heart. It occurs as a part of the parable of lost things, which our Lord told as a result of the criticism of the Pharisees and scribes because of his actions to the outcasts of his day. These outcasts were inviting him home to dinner and he was accepting. The scribes and Pharisees were offended and complained against him because of this. To answer their complaint our Lord gave the great parable of the lost things; one parable, falling into three parts. There we learn how God views the lost. The first division is the parable of the lost sheep (some are lost through ignorance); then the parable of the lost coin (some are lost through neglect), and now the parable of the lost sons. This, too, falls into two parts. The first is the parable of the rebellious son (those who are lost through rebellion), and now the parable of the respectable son.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I

might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!' And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.' {Luke 15:25-32 RSV}

As in the other parables, our Lord sets in direct contrast two attitudes. They are revealed through the respective actions of the son and the father. Jesus calls our attention to the actions of the son first. He is working in the field when the younger son returns from the far country, and thus does not get home until after the festivities are under way. It is an exquisite touch on our Lord's part to put this boy out working in the field. There is something about hard work that seems to awaken a self-righteous attitude within us. How many have heard (or used) the old phrase. "I've been slaving all day over a hot stove!" There is something about putting forth effort that makes us look down on those who do not.

So the boy comes in from the field and hears the merriment. He makes inquiry and one of the servants tells him that his brother has come home and his father is exceedingly happy about it. We would expect some kind of positive reaction from the elder son after all the years of separation from his brother, but the Lord hastens to make clear that this son's reaction is anything but positive. The news is met by an immediate expression of jealousy and anger, expressed in the most infantile of terms. He begins to sulk and pout like a little boy, and refuses to go into the house. When the father comes out to urge him to come in all the pent-up inward rage comes boiling out. The father's request is met with a flood of bitterness.

Notice the emphasis on self in what the boy says. He was angry and answered his father. "Lo, these many years have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends." Hear also the contempt for his brother and blame toward his father. "This son of yours, who has devoured your living with harlots, when he came you killed for him the fatted calf." The whole expression is one of extreme resentment and bitterness. How familiar this is to us. We have not only heard it, but we have said it. Listening to our Lord's story of the rebellious son who went into the far country we all knew how he felt; we could identify with him. But now we stand in the shoes of this elder brother. There is not one among us who has not reacted this way, who has not felt what this boy felt when he found himself gripped by a paroxysm of jealous rage.

Perhaps it would help to analyze this a bit that we might more clearly recognize the symptoms of this reaction. How easy it is to be blind to ourselves. Others can see us so much more clearly than we can see ourselves. Because of this congenital blindness an objective picture like this helps us recognize, in some moment of truth, what is happening to us. Having studied it in this impersonal way we may be able to recognize it when it happens again.

There are three characteristics that are always present when this attitude is being expressed, and our Lord brings them out beautifully here:

1. The first one (and it always begins here) is a sense of being treated unfairly, a sense of being ignored, of being forgotten or disregarded. "You never gave me a kid, that I might make merry." There is expressed the hurt of being apparently ignored or forgotten. This feeling of unfair treatment is always the initial mark of a self-centered attitude. It is the sign of crushed pride, of wounded ego, revealing the centrality of self. Its most common expression -- as this story brings out is that of anger and a "won't play" attitude. "I'm gonna take my marbles and go home!"

Probably the most extreme expression of this in the Bible is found in the days of King David, who had a Counselor, a very astute and wise man, named Ahithophel. Ahithophel gave King David some advice one day, but his other counselors advised him to the contrary. King David chose to follow the advice of the others and not that of Ahithophel. When Ahithophel heard that the king had disregarded his advice he went home, put his household in order, and hanged himself. That is the picture of those who, like this older brother, are resentful, bitter, and upset within because of a sense of unfair treatment.

2. The second mark our Lord brings out here is that of an over-inflated view of self. Notice how the

older brother describes his own superiorities and advantages. Self-righteousness is always full of self-praise: "Lo, I have served you all these many years." It is in his view entirely a matter of making contribution to his father. There is no recognition whatsoever of what he has learned through these many years, or how much he has profited by the relationship with his father, how much benefit he has derived from it. In his view it is all one way. "I have been slaving for you. I have been giving of myself to you all these years." We recognize this attitude, do we not? How easily it comes to our lips.

"And I never disobeyed you." Certainly that is not true. No one has ever lived up to that kind of a standard. It is remarkable how easily he can conveniently forget the many times the Father has forgiven him his disobedience, and he has been restored and brought back into fellowship. Yet here, there is nothing but the expression of the elder sons' strong points. His view of himself is that of being completely and wholly in the right. That is always a mark of self-righteousness.

3. The third mark is his blame of and contempt for others -- his blame of his father and his contempt for his brother. "This son of yours ..." You can hear the cutting edge of contempt in that. He does not call him his brother and there is no love expressed for the younger son as a brother, and no gladness at his return. He rather views him as something vile, something despicable, something contemptible, as his language reveals. Also there is no love or respect for his father. Oddly enough, in some strange perverted way, as frequently happens, the father ends up with all the blame. It is all his fault. "You never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: but you killed the fatted calf for this son of yours, this contemptible wretch!" How many times have we heard that reaction expressed? It is like a little boy who is running along and falls down. He looks up at his mother and says, "Look what you made me do!"

I here are the three marks of self-righteousness. Whenever it appears it is always thus characterized. How clear and accurate our Lord's analysis is. This is the world's most deadly sin. Our Lord spoke of this more frequently than of any other sin. He dealt with it more severely and more sharply than any other sin. He could be tender, gracious, and accepting toward those who were involved in adultery, or drunkenness or demon possession, but when he faced self-righteous Pharisees in their smug complacency his words burn and sear and scorch. This sin is deadly because it is so easily disguised as something justifiable. This is what is wrong with a self-righteous spirit. It can always be proved by the book to be right. There is always an aspect of it that looks right. That characteristic is here in this story, is it not? There is a sense in which this son can be justified for his attitude. As he sees the picture it looks to him perfectly justifiable that he should feel as he does. But that is always the mark of self-righteousness. It is an apparent right to be nasty to other people. How often we find this among us!

This is peculiarly the sin of Christians. It is expressed in the attitude of those who view the church as a kind of club that belongs to "our kind of people," and who, in one way or another, are resistant to the inroads of others. They want the church to be a group for white, middle class, Anglo-Saxons, or, perhaps, only for Republicans, and heaven help a Democrat who finds his way into it! But this is all wrong. This is self-righteousness. The church of Jesus Christ is to be what Christ wants it to be -- a gathering place for all who have been redeemed; washed, made anew, alive in the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is also the sin of those who have no interest in the lost, either at home or abroad; who think that missions are a waste of time; who have no concern for those who live in darkness and blindness, either around us (in increasing numbers today), or in far distant parts of the earth. They view them all as disreputable, the unwashed, the despicable; hippies, peons, or savages, not worth saving. I saw a bumper tag on a car the other day that really hit me. It read, "Even Dirty Old Men Need Love." And it is true, is it not? Especially dirty old men!

Yet so subtle is this evil, so deeply imbedded in the heart, that it can even show up as the spirit of the elder brother against those who have the spirit of the elder brother! In other words, we can become the snob's snob. We look down on those who look down on people! Some, who have been set free from a harsh, critical, legalistic, judgmental, elder brother spirit then begin to look down upon the harsh, critical, legalistic, judgmental fundamentalists. That too is wrong, is it not?

This last week I heard of a well-known Christian university which advertises itself as "The World's Most

Unusual University" which has erected a steel woven fence around its property, and is now equipping its security guards with machine guns. The press is picking this up and flinging it over the country as an example of what Christianity really is. When I read that, I felt very smug that I didn't have that kind of an attitude. "God, I thank you that I am not like these fundamentalists!" Then I had to judge my own heart for its critical, elder-brother spirit toward these who, having said all else about them, are still brothers in Jesus Christ.

How this all contrasts with the actions of the father in the story. He said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found." Here is true fatherhood. It has two characteristics:

First, notice that this father came out to meet the angry boy. Just as he went out to meet the returning rebel, so he goes out to seek this sulking son. Jesus is thus saying, God loves the self-righteous, the smug, the self-centered legalist even as he loves the rebellious and defiant.

Earlier in Luke's Gospel, in Chapter 6, there is a word which has always arrested me. It is Luke's account of the sermon on the mount, which Matthew also records. In Verse 35, Jesus says,

**"But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High [i.e., you will make it evident to everyone that you are the sons of the Most High, if you display this attitude]; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful."
{Luke 6:35-36 RSV}**

How beautifully that attitude is displayed in this account of the elder brother! The father comes to seek him out despite his sulking, pouting reaction. When he finds him he does not scold, berate, or rebuke harshly, but he entreats him. Nothing reveals the heart of a true father more than this, for there is nothing more difficult for a father to bear than a selfish, truculent child.

Shakespeare said, "How sharper than a serpent's tooth is a thankless child."

But this father controls his reaction through love. I am sure he felt, as all of us feel on such occasions, the sharp rising of the flesh against this selfish spirit, this terrible self-centeredness, this frightful lack of love for his brother. He must have renounced the rising of anger, for he does not express it. He comes out and entreats his son. "Look, son, all mine is yours. Don't be angry because I gave a kid to your brother to celebrate with. You could have had one anytime you wanted it, if you had but asked for it. Everything I have is yours. But you never asked."

Here is revealed the tragedy of this son's relationship. A self-righteous attitude frequently occurs in those who are sitting in the midst of great possibility, but never claim it. They get upset when they see others, whom they feel do not deserve anything, coming in and getting what they could have had, but never asked for, never claimed. This is the problem here.

It reveals that this son is actually more lost than the other was. He, too, is in a far country -- a far country of the spirit -- far removed from the father's heart. He does not understand his father. He has never learned to share the same spirit his father has, and the reason is because he never asked, never tried. He took for granted all that was given him and made no effort to move further.

So his father entreats, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. Now don't be angry because I have shown love and grace to your brother." Notice how he corrects him. He does not say, "my son," but he calls him "your brother." "For this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found; and therefore it is fitting to celebrate."

Jesus ends the story with this boy standing outside the house. We do not know what happened. He is nursing his wounded ego and whether he repents, goes in, and joins the festivity or not, we do not know. Jesus leaves the question hanging in the air.

The story was addressed, obviously, to the Pharisees and scribes who were showing just this spirit of the elder brother. But the Lord leaves it there, as though he is saying to them, "Look now, it is up to you. This is the way you are before God. God loves you, but your selfish, self-righteous, self-justifying spirit has put you, too, in a far country. Unless you are ready to see yourself as you are and respond to the love of God, you will remain where you are -- outside, and not in."

How many times this spirit appears in the stories, parables, and comments of our Lord! It is unquestionably from this group there will come those people who, as recorded in Matthew's Gospel, will come to him at the end and say, "Lord, Lord, have we not done mighty works in thy name? Have we not done great things in your name, cast out demons, and done mighty works?" But he will say to them, "Depart from me, for I never knew you," {cf, Matt 7:22-23}. Yes, you were in the midst of everything, but you never entered into anything. You never caught on, you never laid hold of what was available to you. So, by your own judgment, you have left yourself outside.

That is where our Lord leaves this story, and that is where we shall have to leave it.

I am sure there were some among them who did see what he was getting at, who judged their harsh, critical, spirits. Surely we need to do the same. Nothing is more damaging to the cause of Christ than the censorious blame we cast at each other before the world. They see harsh judgmentalism in Christians who ought to be speaking in love, grace, and mercy. If we are to display the same Spirit as our Lord, we must begin by judging this hard attitude within us, and become warm, tender, and compassionate toward those who, in rebellion, have wandered away. We are all that kind of people, ourselves.

As we come to the end of this story and hear ringing in our ears the notes of selfishness, resentment, and bitterness of this elder brother we know that here is our kind of people, too. There is not one of us who has not been guilty of this. So we must judge ourselves in the light of God's word.

Prayer

Our Father, we who have been rebels have found you to be gracious, tender, merciful and compassionate when we returned from the far country. Now, Lord, save, us from turning around and being harsh, judgmental, demanding, and full of blame toward those who are like what we once were. How clearly your word judges both attitudes and shows us that only what is in accord with the Father's heart is true fatherhood and true Christianity. Grant, Lord, that we may manifest that which is so desperately needed in this hour. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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Scripture: Luke 15:25-32
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GET SMART WITH MONEY!

by Ray C. Stedman

The parable we are about to consider concerns the choicest set of rascals ever to appear on the pages of

Scripture. The Lord Jesus took certain sanctified delight in shocking the prudes and prigs of his day, and thus we have this story. It occurs in the sixteenth chapter of Luke immediately following the great parable of the lost things, which has occupied our attention now for several Sundays. That parable, remember, was addressed to certain self-righteous Pharisees who were complaining because Jesus associated with down-and-outers, the outcasts, the unwashed, the hippies, peons, and sinners of his day. Following that he gives to his disciples in the hearing of all -- the Pharisees still listening -- another parable.

He also said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a steward, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his goods. And he called him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward.' And the steward said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the stewardship away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do, so that people may receive me into their houses when I am put out of the stewardship.' So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' He said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' He said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' The master commended the dishonest steward for his prudence; for the sons of this world are wiser in their own generation than the sons of light.'" {Luke 16:1-8 RSV}

The key to the parable is the last sentence: "the sons of this world are wiser in their own generation than the sons of light." I once gave a series of lectures at a well-known seminary, and a few students were greatly incensed and offended with me because I said that a Christian could learn a great deal from a worldling. They objected strenuously to the idea that Christians could learn anything from worldlings. They were so upset by it that I was glad that I was not living in the Middle Ages, for I think if I had I would have been burned at the stake before the end of the week. But to prove I was right, I quoted this saying of our Lord: "the sons or this world are wiser in their own generation than the sons of light."

This parable is about two thoroughgoing "sons of the world," children of this age. One is a steward who lived by his wits. He has no hesitation in pulling a fast one on his master in order to feather his own nest. A report came to his master that this man was guilty of certain shady practices -- certain kickbacks had come to light and there were high expense accounts involved -- and so it was reported that he was wasting his goods. Without any investigation, the master called the steward in and summarily dismissed him, but required an account of the stewardship before he left. And so the steward faced the bleak alternative of either having to go to work and dig ditches for a living, or to beg his living from someone else. Neither of these alternatives suit him at all. He has convinced himself that he is not strong enough to dig, and he is too ashamed to beg (though he wasn't too ashamed to steal). So he suggests a third alternative that he decides to follow.

He cleverly decides to put his master's debtors in his own debt. Evidently they owned the master a certain amount of rent, which in these days was paid in kind, paid in goods. So he called those debtors in and reduced their debts. The interesting thing is, he did not give the same reduction to everyone. In reading this parable I have wondered why he reduced one man's debt by 50% and another man's debt by only 20%. I rather judge that the man whose debt was reduced by 50% had a bigger house than the one with the 20%! But whatever the reason, that is what he did.

All of this finally comes to the attention of the master who, instead of being angry when he hears what his clever servant has done, commends him. This indicates something of his own business standards! He commends him for this dishonest action. He admires him and regards him as a very clever scoundrel -- and who could appreciate a clever scoundrel better than he. Jesus said that he was commended "for his prudence," i.e., his shrewdness, because the children of the world are wiser in their own generation than the sons of light.

Now, the focus of interest here is not in the characters of the story, as in the previous parable or the two sons. The steward is really not the center of this story at all. Our interest is focused upon the comments Jesus makes about this story. He draws four conclusions from it of great importance to us. We will look at these in a moment. But first we must see the subject our Lord is illustrating here. This was rather a shocking story to the Pharisees who were listening, and perhaps to the disciples as well. Certainly it has been disturbing to many

through the centuries since. You can hardly read a sermon on this passage that does not begin by saying, "Here is a strange and unusual story our Lord told which we must regard as teaching by contrast instead of comparison, because he certainly does not want us to follow the actions of this dishonest man." Usually this indicates that the commentator has not fully understood what our Lord is getting at, what his subject is.

The real subject is money. This is revealed clearly by Verse 14. Luke says:

**"The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they scoffed at him."
{Luke 16:14 RSV}**

They ridiculed him because he suggested there was a link between money and spirituality. That is what our Lord is discussing. He is commenting on the universal temptation among men -- even among his disciples -- to love money, and he is showing how to handle money rightly. Surely we should have expected this of Jesus, for he always faced life exactly the way it is, squarely and without illusion. He knew that hunger, sex, and love of money are the three most powerful drives in human life. Anyone who lives in this world is going to have to come to terms with them in some way. So it is not at all surprising that he should choose to deal with his disciples on this and help them understand how a Christian should view money, since he must live with it, work with it, and use it. Based therefore on certain elements in the story, he makes four insightful comments, and it is with these we will concern ourselves.

The first is found in Verse 9.

**"And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon [his term for money], so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations."
{Luke 16:9 RSV}**

This comment grows out of the conclusion he has stated in Verse 8, that "the sons of this world are wiser in their generation than the sons of light." "Therefore," he says, "make friends for yourself, you sons of light, by means of money in order that when the money fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations." Within the limits of their view, worldlings (those who live only for this life, those to whom the boundaries of existence are birth and death and the only things that are important are the things which lie between) are often more consistent and more persistent in obtaining their goals than Christians are within their much wider and larger view of life. This is the point he is making. Here is this steward, and although he is a rascal and a scoundrel, at least one good thing can be said of him -- he thinks of the future and he prepares for it. He takes great pains to provide for it. He anticipates what is coming and he spends time and effort getting ready for it, and for this he is commended. Our Lord clearly suggests that if only we Christians would take seriously the fact that this life is but preparation for a far greater and vaster life to come, and that what we learn here is what prepares us for living there, and if we fail to learn here we will not be ready, as we could be and should be, for that life to come -- if only we would take that seriously it would make a great difference in what we do now.

Clearly this is true. The most powerful motivation to get people to read their Bibles is to help them see that it is here they can learn how the universe operates. I do not mean the physical universe -- I mean the world of social relationships and what God has in store now, in this life, and in the future to come, and how these two relate to each other. The only place we can get straight information on this is here in this book. Once people catch that, they want to read the book, to study it, grow in it, and thoroughly understand it. Jesus said, "He that follows me shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life," {cf, John 8:12}.

A lady said to me this week, "I came to the place where I decided that I would study my Bible as thoroughly and with as much effort as I studied real estate a few years ago, to learn how to be a real estate agent. When I began to put that much effort into it, the book came alive and I've grown so much and understood so much since."

That is exactly what Jesus is underscoring. The trouble with Christians is that they will not take their view of life seriously. If they did, they would imitate the assiduous effort that children of this world put into preparing for the future, even though that future will crumble apart at death. If we believers would put as much time and effort into planning our homes and caring for our families and the lives of our children as we do in planning

for business enterprises and opportunities for advancement, we would have none of the problems in Christian homes that we are now having, or at least far less. We would understand that these are the great and important things of life. So our Lord's first conclusion is: Be wise about money, use it to make friends for yourselves, so that when the money fails -- and it will -- the money that you use properly now will have provided for you friends who will welcome you into the eternal habitations. His advice is, use money while it still has value. Do not avoid it, do not evade it. Do not pretend it is beneath you, that it is something unspiritual. On the other hand, do not save it up as though it were an end in itself. The thing about this steward is that he understood that money is to be used. It was for something. It was not to heap up, to hold in a bank account and watch it grow, but it was for something. He only had it for a little while, but he used it while he had it. It was not an end in itself -- he accomplished something with it. So the believer, the Christian, is to use money as a temporary vehicle to accomplish permanent good. If this steward, Jesus says, on his level of understanding could use money to serve his own best ends, how much more can Christians do the same on their level of understanding of life. Make friends by the proper use of money while it still has value, for there is coming a day -- and it is absolutely certain -- when it will lose its value.

Years ago a young man said to a friend of mine, "My uncle died a millionaire!" My friend said to him, "He what?" "He died a millionaire." My friend said, "No he didn't." The young man bristled a bit. "What do you mean? You didn't even know my uncle." My friend said, "No, I didn't, but I know he didn't die a millionaire." The young man said, "What do you mean?" And my friend simply asked, "Who has the million now?" No, no one dies a millionaire; he dies poverty-stricken. All of us will.

Years ago I learned that morticians are sometimes called upon to provide suits for burial for those who have none of their own. They have special suits made up and the distinctive thing about them is, they have no pockets. They do not need any where they are going.

Yes, "it shall fail," said Jesus, and it will. Money, unrighteous mammon, cannot last. This steward only had it for a few days. That is the whole point of this story. He only had a few more days -- hours at the most -- to utilize this money, but he used it while he had it. He did not try to save it, or hang onto it. He could not, and he knew it, so he put it to work. That is the point Jesus makes. Soon it shall fail, shall forsake us; certainly at death, but perhaps even before then.

Who knows but whether it may not be in the will and purpose of God to let the Communists take over United States. Then the capitalists would be turned out of their houses and our fine clothes will be worn on other people's backs. The god of mammon will not help us then. He will be the one to forsake us.

But while you have it, says Jesus, use it. Use it now for purposes that will transcend this life. Do not use it only for that which will help you now. Use it that which will extend beyond life; it to help the weak, the poor, the ignorant; to spread the truth; to feed the hungry both in body and soul. Too soon money will be gone and then it be of no value to you whatsoever unless you have properly used it.

Notice how Paul picks up this teaching in his first letter to Timothy. In the closing chapter he says,

As for the rich in this world, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on uncertain riches but on God who richly furnishes us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous, thus laying up for themselves a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life which is life indeed. {1 Tim 6:17-19 RSV}

That is exactly in line with what our Lord is saying in this parable. Jesus gives another comment in Verse 10:

"He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and he who is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much." {Luke 16:10 RSV}

This comment grows out of the fact that this dishonest steward was dismissed. His master let him go. Why? Because he found him unfaithful in a little, and he therefore suspected, not without good reason, that the man was unfaithful in everything. So, without instigation, he let him go -- just like that! What the Lord is saying

here is that we must learn to view money as an indicator of hidden character in others.

You and I do not know what really goes on inside other people, even other believers. We hear their testimonies and see them at church, performing various ceremonies which give the impression that they are good, solid, dependable, trustworthy Christians.

But watch, observe how they handle money, says Jesus. Because if a man is faithless in these little things he will also be faithless in the important things, the spiritual matters that make a man a man. If he is slow in paying his debts, he will also be slow in obeying spiritual principles. If he is careless about his money, he will also be careless about truth, or love, or the great things of life.

Later on, in the epistles, the Apostle Paul tells the church that their leaders, the elders of the church, must be men of good reputation, well thought of by outsiders (those outside the church). They must be men who have an impeccable reputation in business and financial affairs. If otherwise, then they are not trustworthy in the great things, the spiritual realities of life. So money can properly be used as an indicator of the real character of another.

But then, our Lord does not leave it there. He presses on, in Verses 11 and 12, to indicate that we can also view our handling of money as an explanation for the lack of spiritual power in our own lives.

"If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?" {Luke 16:11-12 RSV}

The "who" in both these sentences is God. What he is saying is, "Look, if you cannot handle earthly affairs faithfully, then God will not give you spiritual riches and power. If you are not faithful in these matters which belong to someone else, then neither will God give you that which is properly yours." Here we have the phrase again, "unrighteous mammon." It means "lord of unrighteous people, the god of the unrighteous." In other words, money is the god of the world. It is everywhere worshipped. Even Christians sometimes unthinkingly joke about it. We repeat the saying of the world, "Money is not everything, but it's way ahead of whatever is in second place." Thus we give testimony to the fact that money is the god of this world. The love of money is the controlling factor in most lives. It is deceitful. It is a lying lord, whom the world serves. It promises much; it delivers little. The Lord sets it in contrast with those "true riches" which really make life worth the living.

To me the most hopeful and promising thing about the present generation, with all the negative things that have been said against it, is that for the first time in the 20th century, loudly and clearly a generation is saying that materialism is not worth living for, that there are things far more important than houses and cars and mink coats; that love-filled lives and love-filled homes are more important than riches and wealth, and more valuable than prestige and status.

This is what our Lord is saying, too. These are the true riches. But if we are not faithful in these things, Jesus says, then who will give us these true riches? And if we are not faithful in that which belongs to another? -- that is a revealing word, is it not? Here our Lord is saying that nothing material really belongs to us; it is only loaned for awhile. We say we hold title to a home and property, or our car, that these things belong to us. No, they do not. They are loaned to us; they belong to God. They always have, and they always will. Every one of us must give them up sooner or later. They only belong to us for awhile, loaned to us by God. But if we cannot handle even these things rightly, says Jesus, then who will impart to us that which is really ours. To the believer this means all that is available to him in his inheritance in Jesus Christ. All that Christ can be to you, that is what is yours. But God will not give it to you if you are faithless in these other things. If you are unfaithful in the temporary, then you must indeed be weak in the permanent.

Finally Jesus comes to his last conclusion:

"No servant can serve two masters; for 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 God and mammon."

{Luke 16:13 RSV}

The emphasis here is on the word *and*. You cannot serve God *and* mammon. You must recognize that money is the image of a rival god, whom you dare not love, or serve. Use it, yes, but do not love it, and do not serve it.

Now, let us be perfectly blunt, as our Lord was here: What he is really saying to us is, you cannot live to make money and live to serve God at the same time. It cannot be done. You are only kidding yourself if you think it can. If the reason you are living, the reason you are working, is to make money for the sake of the things that money can buy, then that is your god, and you do not and cannot serve the living and true God. You can love God, and he can gift you to make money, and he has done this with many. There is not a thing wrong with making money or being wealthy, even being a millionaire or a billionaire. But the proof that you love God first, and that money only is an instrument of your love for him, will be that you use that money for the help of others without seeking recognition for yourself. That will indicate that you love God and that you are rightfully serving him with the money he gives you; that it has a right relationship to you.

Money is not given to you for your benefit, but that you might be a steward of it for the help of those others whom our Lord constantly sets before us -- the weak, the poor, the helpless, the ignorant, the blind, the downcast, those whom money can undergird and help. As he says, "make friends by means of unrighteous mammon." You cannot use money only for yourself and really love God. If you use it only for your own pleasure and your own convenience, then no matter how religious you may appear, or how orthodox you may be in doctrine, even how faithful you are in going to church, you are not kidding God, and you are not kidding yourself. You love money and it is your god. These two are set in direct contrast one with the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.

That is why Jesus said, in another context, that it is very difficult for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven. It is not impossible, not at all, but it is very difficult because of the "deceitfulness of riches," {Matt 13:22, Mark 4:19} That is the phrase he used. It is a very insightful phrase. Riches deceive. They give an appearance of power. They make you think you are better than you are, that you are a finer kind of person than you really are. This is what arouses the antipathy of those who do not have money. They sense this feeling of superiority. That is the deceitfulness of riches. And of course, if we are deceived about ourselves, we do not know our need. That is why it is hard for a rich person to enter into the kingdom of heaven. It is hard for him to realize he is as weak, as helpless, and as hopeless as any other person. He must come in contrition, repentance, and helplessness, and receive from God with an empty hand. Men all stand on the same level, in that respect.

As our Lord reminds us in this parable, we are all pressing on to the inevitable day when money will fail, and we must stand before God. We shall stand there without a cent, without a bank account, without property, without anything to recommend us, without reputation, with nothing whatsoever. Then the only thing that will count in our favor is the testimony of those who will say, "Lord, when I was really in need he gave me, at cost to himself, that which helped me along. He showed love to me, and proved it by giving of himself to me." At the close of the great Olivet Discourse our Lord puts it on these exact terms: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me," {Matt 25:40 KJV}. But the surprising thing is, everyone is unaware when this happened. Both the sheep and the goats say to the Lord, "Lord, when did we see you hungry? When did we see you in prison or sick, and ministered to you? When did we do this?" God does not judge, as we do, by the moments of life when we are aware of what we are doing. The evaluation of God comes in moments of unconsciousness, when we act not out of what we want others to see, but what we have actually become. Thus, in the unconscious tests, the unconscious moments of life, we are demonstrating what money means to us in relationship to God. Those are the moments God sees and uses to show us where our hearts' affection has lain. The one thing that is important, ultimately, is those eternal habitations where all that life has been here will find its expression and purpose there. But what a terrible thing it will be if we should stand before God and he looks at us and says, "Well, it's been quite a remarkable performance. You lived a strange, and, in many ways, exciting life. But the trouble is, you missed the point."

Prayer

Our Father, these words search us. We know they are not intended to amuse us but to enlighten and instruct us. They are not even intended to condemn us. You are not interested in condemning, Lord; you are interested in unveiling, revealing the truth. Lord, help us to take these matters seriously. For surely, in the moment of seeing things as they are, we can find no defense in ignorance. You have said these things to us plainly and clearly. Grant that we may have the grace to take them seriously and to live by them. We thank you in Christ's name. Amen.

Title: Get Smart with Money
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Scripture: Luke 16:1-14
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THE MAIN THING

by Ray C. Stedman

In the parable we have chosen today we have the only occasion when our Lord drew aside the veil between this world and the next and allowed us to see what is beyond, and to see the intimate relationship between the here and the hereafter. This is a very important matter. You have heard of the epitaph that was written on one tombstone:

Remember, Friend, as you pass by,
As you are now, so once was I.
As I am now, soon you shall be
Prepare for Death, and follow me.

Some wag had added the words:

To follow you, I'm not content
Until I know which way you went!

All will agree that that is the supreme thing!

This parable of our Lord, found in Luke 16, grows out of the reaction of the Pharisees to his story of the dishonest steward. The point of that was that our Lord emphasized and underscored the link between money and spirituality. He indicated that man must love God and use money, instead of using God and loving money, as these Pharisees were doing, and as many still do today. Because of this teaching they ridiculed him, as we read in Verse 14:

The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they scoffed at him. {Luke 16:14 RSV}

They openly mocked him. To answer that scoffing, our Lord tells the story of the rich man and Lazarus. He sets the scene in the opening verses.

"There was a rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, full of sores,

who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table; moreover the dogs came and licked his sores." {Luke 16:19-21 RSV}

Obviously our Lord intends to draw a deliberate and vivid contrast between the rich man and the poor man. You may have heard this rich man referred to by the name of Dives, but *dives* is simply the Latin word for "rich." When this parable was translated from Greek into Latin, this is the word that was used, and consequently this rich man has been called Dives ever since. But our Lord does not name him and it is significant that he does not. All the distinctives about this man are external. All we are told about him is the way he dressed and the way he ate. He was dressed in purple and fine linen, which was the ultimate of extravagance in clothing in those days, and he also set a very fine gourmet table, not once a week but every day.

Thus the only thing Jesus has to say about this rich man is that he was characterized by the externals of life. There are many people like that. Their whole concern is: "What shall I eat, and where shall I sleep, and wherewithal shall I be clothed? -- so it was with this rich man. He lived a hollow life concerned only with the love of display and the desire for self-indulgence.

In direct contrast to this, the Lord portrays Lazarus. He is the only character in any of the parables who is given a name. The name is significant; it means, "God is my helper." Surely this is deliberately intended by our Lord to suggest that Lazarus was a godly man. Even though poor and a beggar, God was his helper.

Some have thought that, because he is named, this is not really a parable. But all other indications are that this is a parable, although it may well be that he knew someone like this.

At any rate, he gives us this name, Lazarus, to indicate the poor man's piety. Though he was a godly man, he nevertheless lay at the gate of this rich man, sick and hungry, his body covered with loathsome, running sores, waiting for any scrap of food to come from the rich man's feast.

In those days they did not use knives or forks or napkins; they would eat with their hands, wiping them on crusts of bread which were thrown out afterward. This was what the poor man, Lazarus, was waiting for -- crusts of bread that had been thrown out after the feast. The only help that our Lord indicates came to this man was from the dogs who would lick his sores. That was the only comfort he had in the midst of his unhappy life. He was ignored totally by the rich man who drove daily out the gate but who never saw him lying there.

In Act 2, our Lord changes the scene completely

The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried; and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes, and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus in his bosom. And he called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy upon me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in anguish in this flame." But Abraham said, "Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from here to us."

There are two frequent reactions to this story of the rich man and Lazarus. The first one is that it rather pleases the old Adam in us to see this bloated rich man get his comeuppance in the next life. We feel it is rather fitting that he is in torment while his magnificent funeral is going on on earth. This is what our Lord suggests by stating that the rich man was buried. He doubtless had a magnificent funeral, but there is nothing said of the burial of the poor man. His body was probably thrown out on the city dump, outside the city walls, as the bodies of beggars customarily were. But in the next life Lazarus is comforted and finds relief, while the rich man is in pain and anguish.

Often people react to this by feeling, "That's the way it should be." Many feel that this is what heaven and hell are for, to compensate for what happens in this present life, to square accounts for what we have to go through down here. But if that is the way we feel about it, then, of course, we are quite wrong. If that were true, then

the Communists are right when they say that religion is the opiate of the people. It is merely designed to keep the poor happy until they get to the next life, and to look for recompense only in the life to come. This is what Communism teaches: The whole purpose of religion is to keep the poor from rebelling against their lot. But we must understand that the rich man was not in hell because he was rich any more than that Lazarus was in heaven because he was poor. Heaven and hell are not a compensation for what you go through here. The principle that determines who goes where is quite different, as we shall see as the story unfolds.

The second reaction to this story is to recoil from this picture of the afterlife especially from the thought of hell, with its flames and its torments. Many are offended by this story and feel that it belongs to a category of Christian literature which has been appended to the record, that it could not really be what Jesus would teach.

Once again that view is wrong. There is absolutely no question but that these words came from the lips of the Lord Jesus himself. And, in thinking about a story like this, we have to face two things very clearly. The first is our Lord's use of metaphors, of figurative language of symbols.

There are symbols in this story. "Abraham's bosom" is one. Obviously we cannot take that literally. The righteous dead do not go and rest upon Abraham's bosom: There simply is not room for them all there. But the phrase indicates that where Abraham, the father of the faithful, is, there these righteous dead are also. We are "sons of Abraham" in that respect and therefore go where Abraham is.

Let us not get hung up on the geography of the hereafter in thinking about this. Some try to locate hell in the molten core of the earth; others try to locate it on some distant planet. But the point of this story is not location at all. We are over literalizing these figures when we attempt that kind of thing. Hell is not a question of location but of another dimension entirely. If we think in terms of dimension rather than location we shall be much more in line with what the Scriptures are getting at.

Take these other figures, the flames, the water, the tongue, the great chasm, etc. They, too, are metaphors, and we must not literalize them any more than we do the other metaphors of Scripture. When Jesus says, "I am the door," you do not start looking for the doorknob, or think of him in terms of a wooden door. That is a figure, and we view it as such. When he says to his disciples, "You are the salt of the earth," they do not go around licking each other but understand that he means this as a metaphor.

When Paul speaks of believers as being "sealed by the Holy Spirit" {cf, Eph 1:13, 4:30}, he does not mean that God comes along with a branding iron when the Holy Spirit comes in and puts a seal upon us; rather, this is a figure of speech.

We use terms like this in our everyday conversation. Some of you may go through a difficult experience, and you say, "Oh, I'm all shook up!" What do you mean? ... that somebody has taken hold of you and shaken you so that your intestines come unraveled? No, you mean that you are upset; the figure is not to be taken literally. So we must understand that our Lord, in a picture like this, does use figures.

But the second thing we must face is that these symbols mean something. They are not mere empty expressions, mere words used only for effect, but they convey a deeper reality. The flames, though they do not mean literal flames, do refer to something that is like literal flames, perhaps a consuming, burning experience -- probably that of memory or of desire unfulfilled. We all know that in our inner life we can have a sense of being burned, consumed by some burning passion within. The only thing we can compare it to is being burned with physical flames, but, though it is not the same thing, it is often more real. Thus the torment here is not physical torment but mental, spiritual -- perhaps that of loneliness (what a torment that can be!), or of despair. These are certainly qualities that are associated with the concept of hell.

Many people say they are going to go to hell because their friends are all there. They will never see one if they do. Hell is a lonely place a place of utter aloneness. There is no one in view here but the rich man. He sees no one but himself.

The water, of course, is a symbol of relief. His desiring to have Lazarus touch the tip of his tongue with a finger dipped in water is a symbol of some kind of relief for which he hopes. The chasm indicates the

impossibility of change. It is not a literal chasm or a great gulf fixed. We make a mistake in trying to visualize hell as a place where all the lost are in flames below, while above, in heaven, are the redeemed and there is a great gulf between them. The chasm simply indicates the impossibility of a change in either condition. No one can pass from the one to the other. That is all that is meant by the chasm.

If we recoil from this, then let us remember that we do not recoil any more than God does. This is not what God wills for human beings. This is what the prophets refer to as "the strange act of God," {cf, Isa 28:21}. It is necessary because of human choice, but it is unwanted by God and veiled in mystery.

The final scene of this story records the further conversation of Abraham and this former rich man.

"And he said, 'Then I beg you father to send him to my father's house for I have five brothers so that he may warn them lest they also come into this place of torment.' But Abraham said 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.' And he said 'No father Abraham; but if some one goes to them from the dead they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead.'" {Luke 16:27-31 RSV}

Here in hell, for the first time, this rich man feels something akin to love: concern for his brothers. Yet it only adds to his torment for he can do nothing about it.

Some of you have seen the musical *Carousel*. Its theme is that a father returns from heaven to warn his daughter who has grown to teenage since he was killed. But this can never be. Much as we would like to have it happen, the dead do not come back to warn us.

In reading Dr. Helmut Thielicke's commentary on this parable, I was struck by one sentence. He says "The torment of the dead is that they cannot warn the living, just as it is the torment of the mature that the erring young will not listen to them." If you have felt that torment then you know something of what the torment of the dead is -- a desire to warn but an inability to do so.

There are many who in reading this story feel this is quite unfair. Why should God not grant this man his request to warn his brothers: If God really does not want men to go to hell, then why does he not allow the utmost of warning in order that any might be kept from hell? But if that is the way we feel then we have missed the point of Abraham's words. This rich man is not denied his request because God is unwilling to give as much opportunity as possible; he is denied it because it is useless, because it will not work. As Abraham points out, if they do not hear Moses and the prophets neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead.

How accurately this parable portrays our human desire for the spectacular, the dramatic, the shocking to occur! We have all felt this way at times. We ask, "Why is it so hard to believe? Why doesn't God do more? Why doesn't he open the heavens and speak to us? Why doesn't he perform miracles again, as in the days of our Lord, or send an angel to speak to us?" Many feel that if they could only see a miracle, or be spoken to by an angel, then they would believe. But we need to ask ourselves:

- How many who saw the miracles in our Lord's day still believed in him at the end of his life?
- How many stayed with him who believed because of the miracles?

We know there were very few. Only a handful of people stood around the cross. And what did men do when, shortly after this, another man named Lazarus was actually raised from the dead? What did men do? Did they believe? According to the record, they simply took counsel together to put him to death again! Even when Jesus himself returned from the dead (and that story has been flung around the world since) men do not believe.

No, Abraham is right. The most convincing proof is "Moses and the prophets," the Word of God, especially that Word made flesh, come to dwell among us. The rich man was in hell because he refused to heed Moses and the prophets, not because he was rich. His activities as a rich man grew out of his refusal to hear Moses

and the prophets. His self-centered, self-indulgent life is a reflection of that refusal, but he is not in hell because he was rich.

Lazarus, on the other hand, is in heaven because he believed Moses and the prophets, because he believed them he made God his helper and trusted in him. He is not in heaven merely to give him compensation for what he went through on earth. There will be many a poor man in hell, as there will be rich men in heaven. No, he is there simply because he believed Moses and the prophets.

So, what our Lord is saying here is: The main thing in life is to give heed to what God has said, to heed Moses and the prophets. The point of this story is that you and I are the five brothers that are left behind.

This is the whole point.

You may be young, sauntering your way through life with life all ahead of you, thinking, as these five brothers undoubtedly thought, "I'll take one world at a time. I'll enjoy life now, and when the next life comes along I'll handle it then." But the point of this whole story is that *then* is determined by *now* .

That is the whole issue. You are put here *now* to learn reality, to distinguish good and evil, and to appropriate God's method of deliverance. That is why you are here. Unless you learn these things now, there will not be any glorious life to come. Thus the main thing is Moses and the prophets, especially this last and greatest of the prophets, the One who tells us this story!

- What do you know about him?
- What do you know about the death of the Lord Jesus, and what that death meant in relation to your sin?
- What do you know about what he plans to do as a result of your acceptance of that death on your behalf, of his ability to come and live within you, and to impart to you all the glory of his own life that you might live, not in your own strength, but in the power and strength which he gives, living through you in this 20th century hour, in the midst of the pressure and excitement of these days -- to re-live again the life that he once lived 1900 years ago.
- What do you know about that?

That is the point to life. That is what our Lord is saying. Anything that misses *that* is a purposeless, pointless, meaningless life.

The important thing is to begin now, while you are young. "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come" {cf, Eccl 12:1}, says the book of Ecclesiastes. To learn to fear God and to walk in obedience to his commandments -- this is the whole of man. I know the text reads, "This is the whole duty of man" {Eccl 12:13}, but in the Hebrew the word *duty* does not occur. What it says is, "This is the wholeness of man." This is what makes man whole: To fear God and to walk in fellowship with him, in obedience to his commandments and especially those commandments that bring one into the knowledge of and relationship to the Son of God, that his life may be in you to change your whole life, from beginning to end and from inside out. That is living. That is what God intends. That is the purpose of this story.

See how our Lord brings it right to the point? The reason for your earthly existence is that you might learn, through Moses and the prophets, the realities of life:

- What it is all about, and
- The realities which lie beyond,
- What this life is heading toward,
- What its final expression will be.

Everything else must relate, somehow, to that to have any meaning at all.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, we thank you for these clear and precise words that cut through the haze and vagueness of much of our thinking, and help us to set things in right perspective, to bring life into focus again. What is life, Lord, if it is lived apart from relationship to you? It is but an empty dream, a mere fantasy, filling our days and hours, months, and years with nothing but emptiness and that which is illusion. Lord we pray that we may, understanding this, give ourselves to you, that even now young people and older ones alike may in this moment of clarity of thought, give themselves to you; to begin where they ought to begin, with Moses and the prophets, and the One of whom the prophets spoke, the Lord Jesus Christ. Thank you for this in his name, Amen.

Title: The Main Thing
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THE CURE TO LONELINESS

by Ray C. Stedman

In our series on the *Treasures of the Parables of Jesus* we have been looking at certain fascinating stories that our Lord told which illustrated some fantastic truths, and have been trying to discover what was hidden away, by divine forethought, in these wonderful stories. But not all the parables of Jesus are stories. Sometimes he used what we might call a *mini-parable*, i.e., a metaphor, a figure of speech, a parabolic illustration. Around this, he would gather certain vital teaching. Because this is Communion Sunday, and a parabolic illustration which our Lord used is very fitting, I want to look at one of these mini-parables. It is the record of the last public utterance of Jesus before he went to the cross, found in John 12, Verses 20 through 26.

Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew went with Philip and they told Jesus. And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If any one serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also; if any one serves me, the Father will honor him." {John 12:20-26 RSV}

This was a crisis moment in our Lord's ministry. It came just before the cross, as the opposition to him was sharpening throughout the city. John goes on to record in the next chapter how he took his disciples apart into an upper room and there delivered his last discourse in which he outlined for them the relationships that would obtain in the age of the church, to follow.

In this account of the visit of the Greeks, we have the third of the three occasions when the voice of God spoke directly from heaven, during the life of the Lord Jesus:

- The first was at his baptism. As he came up out of the water, God spoke from heaven and said, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" {Matt 3:17 KJV}, and thus set his seal upon the thirty silent years of our Lord's life.

- The second occasion was at the transfiguration, when Peter, James, and John were with the Lord on the mount and suddenly he was transfigured before them. When Peter, in his impetuous bluntness, suggested that they build three tabernacles and stay there to spend time with Moses and Elijah and Jesus, the voice of God spoke again from heaven and said, "This is my beloved Son (not Moses or Elijah); listen to him," {cf, Matt 17:5}.
- Again, on this occasion when the Greeks come to visit Jesus the voice of the Father comes from heaven, "I have glorified my name, and I will glorify it again," {cf, John 12:28}.

Now we are not told why these Greeks wanted to see Jesus, though it is not surprising that they did, for the whole city was talking about him at this time. In Verse 17 of this chapter, we learn that the whole city was astir, yet agog over the resurrection of Lazarus.

The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead bore witness. {John 12:17 RSV}

Men were still stirred by this amazing miracle that had happened just over the Mount of Olives, in the little village of Bethany, and they were talking about it everywhere. Evidently these Greeks, coming up to Jerusalem, perhaps as tourists, and allowed to enter the court of the Gentiles, had heard rumors of this amazing man and wanted to see him. They found the disciples of Jesus and very naturally chose Philip as the one to approach because he bore a Greek name. Philip and Andrew are the two disciples who bore Greek names. John tells us also that Philip came from Bethsaida in Galilee, and Galilee was noted for its strong Greek influence. Philip may well have been named for Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great. At any rate, these Greeks recognized a kindred spirit and came to him and asked if they could see Jesus.

Now they did not merely want to see him as a kind of tourist attraction; they wanted conversation with him. They wanted an interview with Jesus. Philip did not know what to do about that. He was the quiet, mousy one of the disciples. You will find him appearing a little later, in Chapter 14, and there also he reveals a quiet spirit. So he went to Andrew, and they held a committee meeting. This was a very good committee meeting, because they reached a prompt decision.

But, oh, the risks God takes sometimes in carrying out his program! Imagine committing such an important decision to a committee! Most committees merit the well-known definition:

A group of the uncommitted,
appointed by the unwilling,
to do the unnecessary.

But this committee functioned properly. They made a quick decision and brought the request to Jesus. When they reported the request of these Greeks, the Lord replies to them very strangely.

And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified." {John 12:23 RSV}

This reply must have startled Philip and Andrew. For 3-1/2 years while they had been with Jesus they had heard him say over and over, "My hour has not yet come." You have the first account of it in the first miracle Jesus did, when his mother came to him and asked him to do something about the wine for the wedding feast. Jesus said to her, "Woman, what have I to do with you? My hour has not yet come," {cf, John 2:4}. He did not mean by that that he would not do anything for her, because he did. He went on to change the water into wine. But he meant by it that it would not result in anything significant. There would be no display of his glory through it. No one would understand who he was, no one could see him for what he was, because of that miracle. And so it proved to be true.

Then in the seventh chapter of his Gospel, John tells us that Jesus told his brothers to go on up to the feast at Jerusalem but that he was not going up because "my hour has not yet come" {cf, John 7:6}.

And, in the eighth chapter, as he is speaking in Jerusalem and already the opposition against him is beginning

to form, John says, "No man laid hands on him to arrest him, because his hour had not yet come," {cf, John 8:20}.

Yet now, when a handful of strangers come and the report is carried to Jesus that a certain group of Greeks want to see him, suddenly, to his disciples' amazement, he seems greatly moved with emotion and says, "Now my hour has come. The time has come for me to be glorified." This event seems to be to Jesus like a great clock striking the hour, a momentous moment of his life when all that he had lived for shall now find its fulfillment. This reveals two very interesting things about our Lord, things that have helped me a great deal.

First, it indicates how clearly he recognized that the program of his life was in the Father's hands. Sometimes we have the idea that Jesus knew everything that was going to happen to him before it happened, that nothing ever took him by surprise because he had a kind of preview of his life. But that is a mistaken concept. He did not know anything more what would happen to him during one day, or even in the next moment, than we do. If otherwise, it would not be true that "he was tempted in all points like as we are" {cf, Heb 4:15}, and thus lived on the same level we live. He did not know these Greeks were coming, but he realized when they came that they came in the Father's program, and that everything that happened to him was the unfolding of the Father's purpose in his life.

One of the greatest delivering experiences to me was to learn this truth. I have seen it happen to others as well. When we begin to realize that the Word of God means exactly what it says and that all things that happen to us are planned and brought into being by Another, then we are delivered from anxiety. And therefore we are not to grumble, complain, or gripe and groan at what happens to us, for it is the Father's choice. That is why Paul tells us, "Do all things without murmuring or disputing," {cf, Phil 2:14 KJV}. It is but God's program unfolding for us.

Our Lord lived on that basis and when these Greeks came he understood that they came because the Father had sent them.

The second thing this reveals is also helpful. Because Jesus knew the Scriptures, he could interpret the meaning of this event. He knew what the coming of these men signified because he knew the Scriptures. He knew that it was predicted by the prophets that when the Messiah came, he would be a light unto the Gentiles, although he was to come to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Up to this point, Jesus had restricted his ministry to the confines of Israel's boundaries. Again and again he had announced the fact that he had come but to the Jews. "Salvation," he said, "is of the Jews," {John 4:22 KJV}. But now he recognizes that the hour was striking for the good news to move beyond the confines of Palestine. In the coming of these Gentiles, Jesus sees that the time has come for the promise to leap beyond the boundaries of Israel unto the uttermost parts of the earth. Since that could not happen apart from his crucifixion and resurrection, he knows his hour has come.

Even though we are not personally predicted in the Scriptures, as he was, nevertheless if we know the Scriptures we too can understand the meaning of the events that happen to us. We can see what God is working out in our own lives, if we understand the Scriptures. That is what they are for. We are to take this wonderful book and lay it alongside what happens to us, and so interpret what God is doing. It is one of the most exciting adventures there is, to see how, moment by moment, day by day, through the very circumstances we are living through, if we know the Scriptures, we can, to a great extent, see what God is working out in our life.

In the next three verses the Lord Jesus declares three important things. These are tremendously significant verses. He declares, first, the principle by which he lived his own life. Second, he applies this to others. And, third, he describes the process by which it works.

First, there is his own life principle:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." {John 12:24 RSV}

Whenever Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you," it is a red light shining which says, "Pay attention. What I am about to say is of supreme importance. Don't miss this!" It is his invariable formula for indicating an important saying. The important statement follows, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." What does he mean? This is the central parable of this study.

It is clear that he is speaking of himself. He is the grain of wheat. Here he is among men, unique, different. He is the Son of God, compelling, compassionate, living the life of God in the midst of men, and yet wholly as a man. He was a man wholly filled and flooded with God himself. He possessed the unique secret of life, and everyone sensed it who listened to him. One of the amazing things about the ministry of Jesus is the spell he everywhere cast upon men.

Someone has said there were more lost work days during the time when Jesus preached in Galilee and Judea, than there had ever been recorded before!

We read that crowds everywhere left their work and followed him. Why? Because they sensed that here was a man who possessed the secret of life. He had nothing that men thought was necessary to living. He had no material possessions. He did not even have a place to lay his head. He had no standing, no prestige, no status, no influence with the authorities. Yet, everywhere he went, men sensed that he understood the secrets of life. He knew something unique. He understood what life was all about. So he was like a grain of wheat, alone amidst other grains of wheat, but independent, unique, sharing nothing with the others, isolated from them and unique in their midst.

Now he could have remained that. This is what he is telling us here. He could have remained what he was. He did not need to die. He was no martyr to a failing cause. He himself said that he did not need to die. "No man takes my life from me," he said, "I lay it down of myself, and I take it up again of myself," {cf, John 10:18}. He was not forced to the cross, as some writers suggest. He had no need to lay down his life for he could have returned to the Father, as on the Mount of Transfiguration he returned to the glory instantly without passing through death. There would have been no blame attached to him if he had. He could have chosen to return to the Father, having demonstrated before men exactly what God wanted man to be, and left us with that demonstration and gone back to heaven. No one would have blamed him if he did. But, as he says, if he had done that he would have remained alone. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone." For the rest of eternity, though he would have been thronged with angels and all the other created beings of God's universe, he would have been alone, undeveloped, unfulfilled. There would have been no one else like him in all the universe.

This is very important because it gives us our first clue as to what our Lord is really unveiling here, the problem that affects so many of us -- loneliness. There is a difference between being alone and being lonely. One can be alone and not be at all lonely. One can have no one else around and yet be so satisfied and content, so enjoying oneself that you do not need or miss anyone else. Or you can be in the midst of a crowd, with people all around you doing many things, and be utterly lonely, your heart eating itself out because of the wretchedness and misery of loneliness. This is what our Lord is referring to. He is not talking about being alone; he is talking about being lonely. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies," he says, "it is lonely."

That gives us our clue to what loneliness is. It is unfulfilled life, an unshared life. It is not being developed. It is an incomplete life that stops short of what it is intended to do. That is loneliness. Dr. F. B. Meyer once said,

Many people complain of lonely and solitary lives. They account for their condition by supposing it to be due to the failure of other people. It is however attributable to the fact that they have never fallen into the ground to die, but have always consulted their own ease and well-being. They have never learned that the cure of loneliness comes from sowing oneself in a grave of daily sacrifice.

There he puts his finger upon the cause of this distressing thing that bothers so many today. It is as the Lord suggests here, an attempt to hold on to life, to cling to it, grasp it to oneself, and satisfy oneself, and this results in an undeveloped life.

Our Lord knew what would happen. He states it plainly. "If the grain of wheat does not die, it abides lonely." And he knew also the craving of the Father's heart; that he might bring many sons to glory.

But to do that it was necessary that he die. There was no other way by which what he was could be given to us.

Remember John 1:12? Many of you perhaps entered the Christian life by virtue of that verse. "As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God," {John 1:12 KJV}. As many as received him, to them he gives the power to share his own existence, his own life, to be a son of God. But how is that life made available? Only by dying.

When Major Ian Thomas was with us he taught us a little formula which I have found very helpful. He said of Jesus, "He had to be what he was in order to do what he did." He could never have died and rose again had he not been what he was -- God become man, indwelt by the Father. Then, "he had to do what he did in order that we might have what he is." We could never have what he is if he had not done what he did. That is the meaning of the cross and the resurrection. But, finally, "We must have what he is in order to live as he lived." That is what Christianity is. It is not you and me struggling along, trying to be like Christ, but Christ himself living again through us in these days. That is Christianity. We must have what he is in order to live like he lived.

Thus, in this 24th verse, our Lord has given us the secret of his own life. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." There will be a reproduction of all that is hidden away in the grain of wheat, when it dies.

Now, in Verse 25, he applies this to others.

"He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life." {John 12:25 RSV}

The principle of life out of death is not only true of him; it is true of you, and me, and every other person who ever lived in this world. It is the principle by which life is truly lived. "He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for life eternal." Now follow the parallel here. He is still talking about a grain of wheat. When he says, "He who loves his life, loses it," he is drawing a parallel between the grain of wheat refusing to fall into the ground and thus abiding alone. That is "loving your life." The parallel to losing your life is being lonely. To be lonely is to have lost life. That gives us our second clue in this story, and answers the question, "What causes loneliness?" The answer is, the hoarding of life; the seeking of self-fulfillment.

Since friends are what makes life complete -- we all sense this -- then self-fulfillment is usually expressed by holding on desperately to other people, by becoming possessive, dependent, demanding, wanting others around all the time and being afraid to be alone. It is demanding always the presence or companionship of some other human being. That is what Jesus is talking about. He who loves his life like that shall remain lonely. That is the primary cause of loneliness.

And, says Jesus, he must learn to hate his life in this world. Now do not misunderstand that. Our Lord is not saying your present earthly existence is all wrong, that you must go around hating yourself because you are alive today. That is not what he means. What he is saying is, "you must hate the life which the world lives." Any part of your life which is like the life the world lives you must learn to hate. What is the life the world lives? Well, it is basically self-centered, is it not? Listen to the philosophies echoed in the words of those around you, or even your own thinking. How often do you hear the echo of this philosophy, "Me for me! Number One first. What's in it for me. Take care of yourself, because nobody else will." That is the life the world lives. Now, says Jesus, you must learn to hate that life. Learn to recognize that any part of your life lived on those terms is a life that will wreck you, leave you lonely, abandoned, derelict, unsatisfied and unfulfilled.

Dying means repudiating the indulgence and security which depending on or grasping at others gives us. But we fear such dying, do we not? We are afraid to give up our dependence upon others. We are afraid to spend time alone. Watch yourself when you are alone, and see how desperately you go to any extreme to avoid spending time alone. We all know how it is. "Call someone up, arrange something, get in the car, go somewhere, do something, turn on the TV, turn on the radio, anything -- just don't leave me alone." That is the life the world lives. What the Lord Jesus is saying to us is that there will be no deliverance from the loneliness and boredom and emptiness of the world's life until we learn to renounce and repudiate that kind of living. We must not allow ourselves to live at that level; that is what he is saying.

In Verse 26 he gives us the description of how this process works. It is very important, for here we come to the cure of loneliness. There are three steps:

First he says,

"If any one serves me, he must follow me;" {John 12:26a RSV}

That is, he must be willing to take the steps that I am taking, and go in the direction that I am going. What direction was that? To the cross. He must be willing to allow the old life, this way of dependence, possessiveness, and demand on others to disappear. He must be willing to follow me.

The second step is:

"... and where I am, there shall my servant be also;" {John 12:26b RSV}

What does that mean? That means that, when we take that step of following him, when we allow ourselves to be alone and do not permit ourselves to make demands upon others for satisfaction, we can expect to find these words to be true, "where I am, there shall my servant be also." A divine companionship will come in and take its place. But we can never find that divine companionship until we are ready to face human loneliness. We cannot constantly be satisfying ourselves with other things and expect to discover the reality of Christ's companionship. This is why it is so important that we find time to be alone and allow occasions when we do not have something else ministering to us, that we might let the Lord Jesus himself minister to us. Those who have done so discover that his words are gloriously true. There is a wonderful sense of his power, his presence, his reality which comes into your life. You discover that you do not need others, that Jesus Christ means it when he says he can meet every need of the life, and satisfy the heart to the full. At first it will be a bit painful, but as you progress you will discover he sets you free from the need of human companionship.

Then the third step will be:

"... if any one serves me, the Father will honor him." {John 12:26c RSV}

In what way? Well, in the way that he has suggested in this parable. The grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies -- and what then? It brings forth much fruit. So the Father honors the life that is willing to cast itself upon the divine supply and find the companionship of the Lord Jesus, by bringing out of that life an abundance of fruit, the reproduction of his life, the satisfying ability to become a blessing to others.

This is illustrated for us in nature. It is true about a grain of wheat. Did you ever think of a grain of wheat facing the possibility of death, of dying, of falling into the ground? It looks at itself and seems to be so self-satisfied. "Why should I give up myself? Why should I die? Here I am, so brown, so firm, so fully packed, so smooth and easy on the eye." It wants to continue, because it is unpleasant to think of dying. "Why should I give up myself and lose my identity in some dark hole under the ground?" Yet it is lonely. It senses it is unfulfilled. There is a restlessness about it. So it consents at last to die, to fall into the ground.

What happens? Soon it begins to feel strange sensations. There is a strange tickling feeling which runs up and down its back. It does not know what is happening to it. After a bit it feels something pushing out at the back, and it looks back and there is a little white thing sticking out. It says, "Where in the world did that thing come from! I never had anything like that happen before." (You start living on this basis and a lot of things will

happen that never happened before!) Then it has to hold a committee meeting to determine which way that white thing is going to go, but while it is still debating, the thing turns and goes up, and another white thing appears and starts growing down further into the ground. Before that grain of wheat quite realizes what has happened, it discovers that when it dies there is a hidden lordship that begins to take over and direct the affairs of its life. Without realizing quite what is happening, things begin to happen over which it has no control. But it soon is quite content to let it happen. After a bit that white thing thrusts up out of the earth into the sunlight and turns green, and becomes a blade. Then it grows into a long stem, and begins to form a head with new kernels of wheat, each like the original and yet each one different; no duplications, and yet the reproduction of one life. At last that grain of wheat finds itself fully developed, becoming what God intended it to be, because it consented to the process of dying.

Dear friends, there are many Christians today that are living shallow, mediocre, indeterminate Christian lives because they have not yet discovered this divine Lordship at work. They do not know the power of it to take and direct the life, through pain, heartache, and difficulty, and to bring it out into fulfillment and fruition. It is because they resist dying.

I remember in my own experience how true this was, how painfully for many years I was dependent upon others, and wanted to have friends constantly around me. I was only satisfied when I could be in the company of my friends, and felt that life was hardly worth the living if their smile was not on me, and I was so distressed and hurt when it was not. At last, God, in his grace and mercy, forced me into a situation where I had to learn to be alone and to rest upon him. He opened my eyes to see that the constant demand for others was really selfishness on my part. It was the manifestation of a life he had cut off in the cross, and had no right to live. When I agreed with him and began to open my heart to the ministry of the divine companionship, I found that the Lord Jesus was able to do what he said -- to fill my life to the full. At first it was somewhat painful, but gradually, over a period of time, I found that my need for others was disappearing, and I could satisfy myself with the Lord. Then I discovered something. To my amazement, I discovered that I was able to be a blessing to someone else, a help to another person, that rivers of blessing were beginning to flow out of my life -- unbidden, unpremeditated, and certainly not to my credit at all. They were the product of the life of the Lord, the hidden Lordship at work within, bringing a new thing into being that could never have been there apart from my consenting to die to dependency upon others. When that took place, God began to bring fruit into my life, and has been doing so ever since, in increasing degree.

I must die again and again in many situations and many places, and it is still the same painful struggle at times as it was at first. But there is never a time in which I renounce, repudiate, give up, willingly submit to the condition which takes me from dependence on others, and to cast myself upon the fullness of supply in the Lord, but that there does not come out of it eventual fullness, fruition, blessing, and satisfaction to my own heart.

That is what the Lord is saying to us. Here is the cure for loneliness. It is not merely to lay down your life in some sacrificial act; it is to learn to rest upon another life, a hidden Lord, another supply. Out of that resting will come the sacrificial acts. It is not sacrifice for others that cures loneliness. You can give yourself to many kinds of good causes to try to cure a lonely heart, and you will be just as lonely as ever. But it is the discovery of another relationship, the possibility of fruition from other sources. That is what our Lord calls us to.

This brings us to the table of the Lord. It is fitting we should close with the table of the Lord for here we have that which expresses what we have been talking about. Here are the symbols of the corn of wheat which fell into the ground and died, that it might not abide alone but could share its life with us. This is the principle upon which all Christian life must be lived.

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BREAKING THE RESENTMENT BARRIER

by Ray C. Stedman

The parable we have before us deals with the healing of hurts between people, that is, the way to resolve differences, to heal the breaches that frequently come between members of families and members of churches, to dissolve the resentments and settle the bitter feuds and the fights that sometimes break out.

Some time ago I read a psychologist who said that Christians, he felt, were very much like porcupines on a cold winter's night. The cold drives them to huddle together to keep warm, but as soon as they get close to another they start jabbing each other with their spines and that forces them to move apart; thus they are forever coming together and moving apart in a kind of slow dance.

There may be a great deal of truth to that. You will remember the little jingle that I frequently quote,

To dwell above
with saints we love,
Oh, that will be glory.
But to dwell below
with saints we know,
Well, that's another story.

But now we want to speak about forgiving one another; the only way to break through the resentment barrier that separates us from each other. Forgiveness, of course, is the virtue we most enjoy, and least employ, in our Christian experience. We all love to be forgiven -- we expect it, and want it. But we find it a struggle to forgive; we resist it, and refuse oftentimes to do it.

We are like a little boy who was saying his prayers. As he went down the list of his family, asking God to bless them, he omitted his brother's name. His mother said to him, "Why didn't you pray for Cliff?" He said, "I'm not going to ask God to bless Cliff because he hit me." And his mother said, "Don't you remember Jesus said to forgive your enemies?" But the little boy said, "That's just the trouble. He's not my enemy; he's my brother!"

Perhaps many of us have the same difficulty, as did the Apostle Peter. He too was faced with this same problem, the problem of forgiving his brother. In Matthew 18, in a great passage in which our Lord has been dealing with the question of relationships between those who belong to him, we find Peter, in his impetuous bluntness, coming to Christ with a question.

Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven." {Matt 18:21-22 RSV}

I have often wondered, as I read this account, if Peter was not actually thinking of his literal brother, Andrew. Peter and Andrew were brothers and had grown up together. They had joined the band of those transparent people who never can hide anything. I tend to feel that he actually has in view some offense of Andrew here. Perhaps Andrew habitually left the cap off the toothpaste tube; or he was always borrowing some favorite jacket of Peter's, and wearing it without permission; or perhaps he refused to clean up his side of the room, or some other manifestation of brotherly evil.

At any rate, Peter feels that he is being very magnanimous here in suggesting that he forgive him seven times.

There was good reason for him to think it was magnanimous. The rabbis taught that you only needed to forgive someone three times at the most. The fourth time you could do whatever you liked. They even taught that God did this, based upon a misunderstanding of a text in the prophet Amos, in which Amos repeatedly uses the formula, "for three sins, yea, and for four" {cf, Amos 1:3, et al} God brings judgment upon such-and-such a city. Thus they taught that God himself never forgave more than three times. You can see from this that Peter feels he has gone to the utmost limit when he doubled that, added one for good measure, and suggests that he might be willing to forgive his brother seven times.

Now, there is humor in our Lord's reply. There are many passages which we oftentimes misunderstand and take seriously -- and misunderstand because we take them seriously -- though our Lord is speaking humorously. I am sure there is a note of laughter in his reply to Peter here. If we would put it in modern parlance, what he says is, "Peter, would you believe four hundred and ninety times?" In effect our Lord is saying, it is not a question of how often, i.e., how many times should I forgive my brother. That is not really the question. There is a deeper matter beneath that. The real question is, "Why should I forgive at all? When you see that you should forgive, then you will see, Peter, that there is no limit at all, that forgiveness is the kind of thing that ought to go on without limit." He has only chosen this figure of 490 times as a play upon what Peter has said to him, but it really suggests an unlimited forgiveness. So, to answer that deeper question, "Why should I forgive my brother," our Lord gives us this parable of the unforgiving steward. The opening part of it is found in Verses 23-30:

"Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the reckoning, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents; and as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But that same servant, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat he said, 'Pay what you owe.' So his fellow servant fell down and besought him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' He refused and went and put him in prison till he should pay the debt." {Matt 18:23-30 RSV}

The valuable of this parable lies in seeing that it is a picture of us. The Lord Jesus is here holding up a mirror in order that we might see ourselves. We are the servant who has been forgiven a vast and staggering amount of money, and God is the great king that has forgiven us. This ten thousand talents is an incredible amount. According to the margin a talent was worth about a thousand dollars. Ten thousand talents is ten million dollars which, in those days, would be a king's ransom. The entirely yearly income of a kingdom would hardly be that much.

When the settling of accounts came, this man was confronted with this vast debt and he could not pay it. The king ordered that justice be carried out and that the man, his wife and children, and all that he had be sold, as was possible in those days. Even then it would be far, far short of the amount of this debt. In desperation the man makes an impossible promise. He falls on his knees and says to the king, "Have patience, sir, and I will pay you everything." Now he could never do that. If he worked all his lifetime, and his family also, he would never be able to pay ten million dollars. But in desperation he cries out, and the king's heart is moved by the man's impossible situation, and, out of pity toward him, he forgives him, at staggering cost to himself. It means, of course, that this king assumed the debt himself, allowing it to go unpaid and thus impoverishing his treasury. This is no trifling matter. It was at staggering cost to himself that the king forgave the debt.

We must see ourselves in this if we are going to be helped by this word of Jesus. We must see that the sum of our offenses against God through the years constitutes this kind of a debt, an absolutely impossible amount. Our rebellions, our selfish acts and thoughts, our willful choices, our lovelessness toward one another, and the hurt we have caused others, our pride, our anger, our lusts, our bitterness, our hates, and our lies; all these add up through the years to a staggering debt we owe God and which we cannot pay. But then there comes the good news, the wonderful good news of the gospel. There came a day when we stood in the presence of God and heard him pronounce those words, "Forgiven, in Christ's name." The debt was wiped away. In one moment it was gone. How well we remember, as we look back to it, the glory of that moment when we

realized that before God we stood cleansed, blameless, free; the debt was paid and we were free.

Jesus places, in direct contrast to this, another account which he says occurred immediately, as this man went out from his experience of being so unbelievably forgiven. "As he went out," he met a man who owed him twenty dollars -- that is the amount of a hundred denarii -- and seizing him by the throat he said, "Pay me what you owe." But when the second man says exactly the same words the first had said just a few moments before, "Have patience with me and I'll pay you everything," instead of forgiving him this paltry amount, he throws him into prison till he shall pay the full amount.

That, says Jesus, is what we do when we refuse to forgive each other even the most insulting and injurious offenses. No matter how bad it may appear to us, no matter how hurt we are by what someone has done to us, in comparison to what God has forgiven us, it is like comparing twenty dollars to ten million dollars of debt. And these two events are occurring simultaneously in our lives, in immediate context, just as Jesus said.

There is not one of us here who is a Christian, who does not realize that he did not stop sinning when he was first forgiven in Christ. Despite the increasing light and power that has come to us as we have learned more of the provision for life that God has made available, we have still experienced much failure. Not a day goes by but that we do not stand in desperate need of the forgiving word of the great King. Again and again he cancels out the debt as we come in our guilt and abandon, in the consciousness that we have terribly failed, hearing anew the tender forgiving word. And yet, when someone offends us, how quickly we revert to the basis of justice and start demanding, "Pay me what you owe." "I demand an apology." "Give me my rights." "Let me have what's coming to me." "Treat me like I deserve." "I demand to be treated with respect." How many times do we utter such words?

In the rest of the story our Lord reveals the two great reasons why Christians must forgive those who offend them.

"When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servants as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord delivered him to the jailers [the margin says, accurately, "the torturers"] till he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." {Matt 18:31-35 RSV}

There are two reasons revealed here why Christians must forgive each other:

First, we must forgive because anything less is hypocritical. We cannot demand justice from others because we do not stand on that ground ourselves. As the king said to this servant, "You wicked servant! Should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" This is what Jesus is saying to us. We must forgive one another because we have already been forgiven. Is not that the ground the Apostle Paul takes in Colossians 3, and in Ephesians 4:31?

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. {Eph 4:31-32 RSV}

That is the basis of Christian forgiveness. Jesus says that, when we refuse to do this, when we hold a grudge, or are difficult or bitter and refuse to settle an issue, then we are doing exactly what this unrighteous steward does here. In the very moment of our own forgiveness we are demanding justice, when we ourselves cannot and do not stand on that level.

The sign that we are acting on the basis of justice and not mercy is that, like this servant, we act harshly. That is the invariable mark we are demanding justice and not acting in forgiveness or mercy. We speak severely and sharply to the other. The servant took him by the throat and said, "Pay me what you owe me." It is always the

mark that we are demanding justice when we speak caustically to one another. I have come to learn, by sad experience, as well as by observation, that this is one of the most destructive problems in homes. It is the reason why parents and children are often unable to communicate with one another.

Parents act this way frequently. We consign our children to a prison of rejection and scorn by the fact that we demand justice of them when we ourselves do not stand on that basis. We speak harshly to them, severely. We scold them and act terribly offended by their misdeeds. But, of course, when we do that we are victims of the deceitfulness of sin. We feel that we are defending righteousness, that we are showing our great concern for the truth, for justice and righteousness. But that is never the way it comes across to them. The way it strikes them is that we are being hypocritical, that we are asking them to live on a standard that we ourselves do not fulfill, that we are asking them to be always right, always truthful, always honest, always good, when we ourselves cannot do this. That is what causes rejection on the part of children toward parents, and the feeling that they are hypocritical and not honest.

There is a passage in Second Peter which describes the graces God gives; the grace of self-control, of godliness, of brotherly affection and of loving concern. Peter adds this very revealing word:

Whoever lacks these things is blind and shortsighted and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins. {2 Pet 1:9 RSV}

That is frequently our problem. We demand of others that they act in a way that we ourselves could never achieve, and therefore harshness creeps into our voice. We are severe and unbending, rigid in our demands. It is not that discipline is not necessary, or that we do not need to deal with wrong. The problem is the spirit in which we do it. The minute we revert to the basis of justice we are following the law of retaliation, and the law of retaliation always has an escalating clause in it. Your radio is too loud, so I pound on the wall. You squawk; I roar. The next time we meet, you won't speak to me. So I take advantage of you in a business deal, and soon the thing has escalated till it involves, if the conditions are such, a large group of people and can break out into actual violence and warfare. That is what happens when we deal in the demands of justice toward each other.

But what our Lord is saying is that forgiveness is possible because we have been forgiven. Because this vast and staggering debt against us has been wiped out by the grace of God, we have the capability of forgiving also. These words are not addressed to anyone who is not a Christian. We cannot expect men of the flesh to live on this level. They may forgive an offense, but, even then, it is not on the same ground as Christians. They may remit a penalty, but there is a spirit of hardness and rejection that goes with it. But Christian forgiveness eliminates that hardness. The inner attitude is changed, and there is an acceptance of the person, and an understanding and sympathy extended that permits an honest look at the problem, and opens the door for help. That is the first reason Jesus said we must forgive each other -- because we have been forgiven so very much ourselves.

The second reason we must forgive is because of the torment which an unforgiving spirit inflicts upon us.

"And in anger his lord delivered him to the torturers till he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." {Matt 18:34-35 RSV}

This is but a further amplification of what our Lord is saying in the Sermon on the Mount. He says there, "If you forgive not others their trespasses neither will my Father forgive yours," {cf, Matt 6:15 RSV}. That has been greatly misunderstood by many as teaching that the Sermon on the Mount puts God's blessing on a basis of works, that God is saying to men in general, "Unless you forgive others, I won't forgive you." But that indicates a distorted understanding of the passage. The Sermon on the Mount is addressed to those who have already been forgiven by God. It is addressed to those in whom the Spirit of God lives and therefore God knows they have the ability and capacity to forgive. But if they will not exercise it, the Lord Jesus says, if they insist upon going back to the ground of justice with others, well, then, that is the way God will handle them. If we insist on justice, we will be given justice ourselves. As James tell us, "Judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy," {Jas 2:13}. The result will be that we are "delivered to the torturers."

This is a marvelously expressive phrase to describe what happens to us when we do not forgive another. It is an accurate description of gnawing resentment and bitterness, the awful gall of hate or envy. It is a terrible feeling. We cannot get away from it, we cannot escape it. We find ourselves powerless to avoid it. We feel strongly this separation from another, and, every time we think of them, we feel within the acid of resentment and hate eating away at our peace and calmness. This is the torturing that our Lord says will take place.

In the book of Hebrews we read, "Let no root of bitterness springing up trouble you," {cf, Heb 12:15}. Notice where the trouble occurs? It hits you, not the other fellow.

A number of years ago I had a difficulty with another Christian. I do not believe in evolution in the sense of feeling that men come from monkeys, but I do believe that some men are skunks! This man had done an injustice to me, a very evil thing as I saw it. It hurt me greatly. But the trouble was, he was living about three thousand miles from me. If he had lived next door where I could have done something about it -- thrown my garbage over his fence, or something like that -- it would have helped. But he was three thousand miles away and did not even know how I felt about him. The bitterness I had did not bother him in the least -- but, oh, how it bothered me. It ate at me constantly. I could not forget it. It was always recurring. At every mention of his name I could feel the acid eating in my own heart until, fortunately, reading the Scriptures I ran across certain verses that deal with this matter, and I realized that the problem was not with him but with me. In grace I was enabled to put it away and forgive him, to write to him and tell him so, and forget it. Immediately there was peace brought again to my own heart.

Jesus says that if you do not do this, this torture will go on for as many years as you refuse to forgive. It will never stop.

I had a striking illustration of that occur a number of years ago. A woman in her eighties told me that, fifty years before, her aunt had said something insulting to her, and this woman had never forgiven her. Fifty years later she could recount the event to the precise detail, and she felt all the same bitterness, anger, and resentment welling up within her as when it originally occurred. It was no wonder to me that, by this time, she had become a bitter, crotchety, quarrelsome, unhappy woman who could find no happiness in life whatsoever. She was still in the hands of the torturers fifty years later.

Our Lord is telling us that forgiveness occurs when we stop saying, "Look what you're doing to me," and start saying, "What can I do to relieve your hurt?" That is when we forgive, when we are no longer concerned about self, but are concerned about what we are doing to someone else as retaliation for what they have done to us. The thing that makes forgiveness possible is to remember how our Lord puts this principle. Can we not forgive twenty dollars' worth of injury, when we have been forgiven ten million, ourselves? That is always our situation. Therefore, if there is a grudge, if we have been harboring resentment, if there is a feeling of antipathy, if we do not want to speak to someone else, if we feel cut off from another, two things have happened:

- We have reacted as an ungrateful wretch to the grace that has been extended to us, just as this unforgiving steward did.
- Second, we have consigned ourselves to bitterness of heart, to the eating of the acid of resentment to our own hurt.

This is why nothing will ever take place toward the healing of the world until there is the healing of the church, the healing of the heart, and the healing of hurts, one with another, by the grace God has shown to us.

Let us move over onto this ground, and live on this level.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for dealing so honestly with us. We know you do not show us these things in order to leave us feeling condemned and guilty, but rather that we might take again of the riches of grace, once again hear the word of the great King, "All is forgiven." In the glory of that restored relationship, realizing that this vast debt has been set aside on our

behalf, we can turn to our brother and say, "I'll forget it," and live, Lord, as you have lived toward us. We pray this may find its application in practical ways in the lives of each one of us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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THE CHANCE TO LIVE

by Ray C. Stedman

For our concluding study of the Parables, I would like to turn to Matthew 22, and look with you at the parable of the marriage feast. In some ways this is the easiest parable of all to interpret because there is an obvious meaning lying right on the surface. This parable grew out of our Lord's controversy with the Pharisees during the last week of his ministry, when it was very apparent that he was on his way to the cross. The enmity against him had sharpened tremendously throughout the city and the Pharisees, scribes, and rulers were plotting together to kill him. Knowing this, Jesus spoke very sharply to them and informed them very clearly about what was going to happen. Part of that information was given in the form of this parable, which is built upon what he had said to them earlier, as recorded in Chapter 21, Verse 43: "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it." Here is his announcement to these Pharisees that they were to lose their privileged position and that the gospel was thereafter to go out to all nations everywhere.

In the first seven verses, we have our Lord's description of his own ministry of invitation to the nation, of the refusal of the national leaders to heed what he said; and then his prediction of the ultimate destruction of the city of Jerusalem:

And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a marriage feast for his son, and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the marriage feast; but they would not come. Again he sent other servants, saying, 'Tell those who are invited, Behold, I have made ready my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves are killed, and everything is ready; come to the marriage feast.' But they made light of it and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them. The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city."
{Matt 22:1-7 RSV}

What a clear prediction of what will happen as a result of the rejection by the nation Israel of our Lord's invitation! All of it is couched in this figure of the marriage feast. This is an Eastern wedding scene, as we have noted before in some of our Lord's other parables. The custom there was to invite people to the wedding feast a long time before it actually occurred. The invitations went out and were acknowledged and accepted. Then, when the preparations were complete, servants were sent out to bid those who had already accepted the invitation to come.

It is important to understand this because our Lord here clearly has in mind the nation Israel. Historically, they had been invited to the wedding long, long before, through the prophets whom God had sent them. The

invitation was to come and have fellowship with the Son. (Notice that the marriage feast is for the son.) But now all things are ready. The son is there in their midst and is himself extending this final call, "Come now, everything is ready. Come and enter into fellowship with me." But they refused to heed the summons even though they had already accepted the invitation. That is the picture our Lord is drawing here. As a consequence, we read in the next section, a worldwide invitation goes out to all men, everywhere:

"Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the thoroughfares, and invite to the marriage feast as many as you find.' And those servants went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good; so the wedding hall was filled with guests." {Matt 22:8-10 RSV}

This is clearly our Lord's prediction that the gospel message, with its invitation to worship the Son, is to go out to all the world. Everyone is invited. It does not make any difference whether they have a respectable reputation, or are disreputable in the eyes of society -- bad and good as used here are only men's evaluation. No matter who they are, if people have a need, if they want life, whether they are of good reputation or not, they are invited. We know that history has confirmed that this pattern has been followed exactly. The gospel has gone out to all the world, and it has been "whosoever will may come," {cf, Rev 22:17}. And through the centuries many have come in response, out of the highways and byways of life.

But that is only the understanding of this parable which lies right on the surface. You can hardly miss it, can you? But we would miss a great deal if that were all we saw because it has a deeper significance. So I want to take a closer look at certain of the elements in this parable which will unveil its significance to us here this morning, and its clear implications for our own day.

Notice first that this occasion is a wedding feast. Today we call them receptions, and it falls my lot as a pastor to be present at many receptions. Usually I find them joyful occasions marked by gladness, music, and laughter. In fact, sometimes people work up such elevated spirits that it is hard to keep them out of trouble. They tend to want to perpetrate all kinds of high jinks. That is why you often find the bride and groom driving off in a car that is a disgrace to behold, dragging old cans and shoes behind them. It is an expression of the cheerfulness, the joyfulness, the gladness of the occasion.

It is important for us to understand that this is the way our Lord characterized God's invitation -- the gospel. It is not an invitation to a funeral, even though some people act as though becoming a Christian is equivalent to being soaked for a week in formaldehyde. It is an invitation to joy. It is not an invitation to a formal state dinner, but to a relaxed, cheerful, joyful occasion. It is an invitation, in other words, to life. This is what we so desperately need to understand.

During this tremendously significant last week, when man landed on the moon for the first time -- and when we now even have pictures coming to us from Mars, and are really beginning to understand something of our solar system and the universe in which we live -- it struck me very forcibly how barren and dreary and desolate these places are. I don't want to live on the moon, do you? Once you have seen one square mile of the moon's surface you have seen it all. It seems to be the ugly repetition of the same scarred, barren, dreary landscape. When I first saw the picture from Mars, I mistook it for the moon. It looks very much the same. It struck me as highly significant that, so far, the only beautiful place in our solar system is earth. It was the only beautiful thing the astronauts saw on their trip to the moon -- the beautiful earth. As we look around on our planet we can see something of the goodness and the graciousness of God toward man. What a beautiful place he has prepared for us! How he has flung beauty abroad with a lavish hand! We see it on every side.

This is indicative also of what God has prepared for the spirit in man. His invitation to us is never to unhappiness or sorrow, drudgery or darkness, fear or death; it is to life and to vitality, to excitement, joy, and gladness. We will never understand the gospel unless we understand it in those terms. God is inviting men to come alive, to discover what makes life exciting, challenging, wonderful. A phrase in Paul's letter to the Romans comes to mind here: "For the kingdom of God does not mean food and drink [it is not made up of mundane things even enjoyable things such as food and drink] but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit," (Rom 14:17 {RSV}). That is what God is calling us to.

A few weeks ago a Christian young man was talking with me about what he should be doing for the next few months of his life. He said, "I have two choices before me, two things I can do this summer. One of them I would really hate to do. It doesn't have any appeal to me at all. I feel that perhaps I should do it, but I don't want to. The other is something I really enjoy doing. It's a ministry I delight in." And he looked at me and said, "Of course, it's not difficult for me to know which is the will of God. I know he wants me to do the hard thing, the difficult thing." I asked him, "Why do you say that?" He said, "Well isn't that what God always wants?" He wants us to do things that are tough and challenging and difficult." I said, "My friend, I'm afraid you don't know God very well yet. The Lord Jesus said, 'I delight always to do those things that please him.' It is great, it is exciting, it is challenging to do the things that please him."

This is the testimony of millions who have become Christians that they have found the secret of life. God has invited them to a joyful feast in fellowship with the Son of God.

A lady said to me a couple of weeks ago. "Oh, I had no idea that, when I became a Christian life, would be as exciting and wonderful as it is. I accepted the Lord fifteen years ago and I had no idea at the time that I would ever enter into the kind of peace, gladness, and joy that I've been experiencing of late." That is the testimony of many.

I know there are exceptions. The philosopher, Nietzsche, once said about Christians. "If you want me to believe in your Redeemer, you're going to have to look a lot more redeemed." Some of us need an exhortation like that. But the important thing to understand is that when God issues the invitation through the gospel, he is inviting us to discover life -- life as it really is.

Notice also the nature of the call here. It is an invitation. It is not a summons from the draft board to report for duty; it is an invitation which recognizes the right of the ones invited to reject, if they so desire. It is without coercion or compulsion. When God offers to us this marvelous gift of life in Jesus Christ, he does not threaten us. He does not try to coerce or compel us to come; he offers it as an invitation which we are free to accept, or reject, if we want to. "Come, all you who are weary and heavy laden," says Jesus, "and I will give you rest," {cf, Matt 11:28}. "Come if you really want to live," is the nature of the invitation.

"Well," someone says, "wait a minute! Doesn't it say here that the king was angry when they refused to come? And that he sent his troops and destroyed these people and burned their city? That looks pretty compulsory to me." Yes, he did do that. But notice when he did it. He did not grow angry when they first refused the gospel invitation. Instead, he sent other servants to plead with them. Here is a revelation of the patience and kindness of God, is it not? There is no resentment on his part at this callous refusal to come when everything has now been made ready. Rather, he sends other servants and another entreaty, and he describes the feast to them, trying to entice them to come. "Everything's ready," he says, "I've made ready the dinner, the oxen and the fat calves." This was the greatest gastronomic treat they could expect in those days. It was all ready and he pleaded with them to come.

But notice the reaction of these people. Monstrous, really. The record says that they made light of the invitation. Now we could understand this reaction if it were a case of excessive demand on the part of God. All of us get tired of someone who is constantly demanding something from us. Our tempers grow short after awhile, and we say, "Leave me alone! I don't want to do it. I'm not interested." But that is not the case here. This was an invitation to enjoy what these people wanted more than anything else. It was what they desired, what they were looking for in life -- joy and gladness, fellowship, and companionship -- fulfillment in every sense. So when they rejected and refused it, they were refusing the very thing that they wanted most.

What stopped them? Why did they thus refuse? Matthew tells us "they made light of it." In a parallel passage. Luke says they began to make excuses. One man said, "I bought a field, so I can't come." Another said, "I've bought some oxen and I have to go try them." And a third said, "I've married a wife, and I can't come," {cf, Luke 14:18-20}. (His was probably the best excuse of all.) What does all this mean? It means that these men were putting the everyday concerns of their lives before this call to discover and enjoy the secrets of life. They were taking the ordinary, normal matters of business and counting them as of far greater importance than this which actually meant everything in life to them. This invitation, which was the embodiment of everything they wanted most of all, they downgraded and treated with scorn and indifference, in contrast to some of the less

important matters of life. There is nothing wrong with the things that they set in its place; but obviously, the whole point is that they had lost their perspective. They could not evaluate things properly and they treated lightly this marvelous, gracious invitation to come to the fellowship of the Son.

Some went even further, the record tells us. They seized the messengers which the king had sent and killed them. They not only resisted the invitation and refused it, but they hated it. This is revealing, is it not? They murdered the ones who brought it. And it was then, only then, that the king became angry after they had descended to murdering the ones he sent. Then they had become criminals, and it was then that he came and destroyed the city.

All of this reveals a very great mystery about human lives. It reveals that what this marriage feast symbolizes -- this fellowship with the Son -- is so essential, so necessary to man that, without it, man cannot remain human. When he refuses this, something happens to him. He begins to deteriorate, to fall apart. Either he loses his perspective and life turns upside down, so that rather trivial things become all-important, while really important things are treated lightly and with scorn. That is, he lives then in an unreal world, a phantasmic world, an *Alice in Wonderland* existence where everything is out of proportion, a world of unreality. Or, he becomes animalistic, fierce, hateful, and dangerous, so that he actually breathes out anger, hatred, and threatening against the very message sent to set him free.

Is it not striking that the two major problems of the day in which we live are meaninglessness and violence? It is because men turn a deaf ear to the message of the king to come to the wedding feast, to come to the fellowship of the Son. And when they refuse that, they are refusing such an essential element of human life that they no longer can remain human beings in the true sense but drift off instead into one or the other of these two extremes.

But, as the record tells us, the king is not defeated. He is determined to have guests at the wedding. So the invitation goes out, literally, "to the partings of the highways," to the place "where cross the crowded ways of life," where people mingle and mix without distinction, where there are all kinds -- the respectable and the disreputable, the up-and-outers and the down-and-outers. The invitation goes out to anyone who will hear, anyone who wants to live. If what you are after is to discover the secrets of life, then you can come. That is very much like what we have in the opening of the Sermon on the Mount. The Lord Jesus said. "Blessed are the poor in spirit [those who do not have anything in themselves to count upon] for theirs in the kingdom of heaven," {Matt 5:3}.

The parable takes a sudden turn here. A rather strange event occurs:

"But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment; and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen." {Matt 22:11-14 RSV}

The high point of the feast was when the king himself came in. After all, that is the chief value of this feast -- the opportunity for a personal acquaintanceship with the king. The king saw there a man without a wedding garment. He was what we would call today a gate-crasher. He came in without the prescribed proper dress. He was there on false grounds, in other words. At every Eastern wedding like this, the one who gave the marriage feast always provided wedding garments for the guests to wear. They did not cost them anything -- they were provided. All they needed was to put on the wedding garment and they could come to the feast. Yet when the king comes he finds a man there without one.

It is not difficult to interpret this, as we have garments used many times in Scripture as symbols of righteousness. The wedding garment is a picture of the gift of righteousness which the Lord gives to those who come with no righteousness of their own. It is a picture of that righteousness of Jesus Christ with which we stand clothed in God's presence if we are ready to renounce any dependence upon ourselves, or upon anything we have done, or our background, heredity, ancestry or anything else we might think of value to us. If we renounce our righteousnesses, which, as the Scripture says, are as filthy rags, then God has the gift of

his righteousness to give to us.

This man was standing there without a wedding garment. And, in the original language, the account makes clear that his was a deliberate refusal. There are two Greek words for *not* and both of them are used in this account. In the first sentence we read, "But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had not a wedding garment." The word simply means the negative. He did not have one, that's all. A plain statement of fact. But when the king said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here not having a wedding garment?" he uses another Greek word. It is a word that implies a deliberate action of the will. This king is saying to him, "Look, friend, you are here under false pretenses. You are deliberately rejecting what has been provided. Your being here without a wedding garment implies that you are in rebellion against all that this wedding feast stands for. You are here as a phony, a sham."

And we read that the man was speechless; he had nothing to say. So the king said, "Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth." In other words, this man is as bad off as those who refused to come in the first place. He is in the same condition as those who actually hated the king and fought against him. This is a picture, easy to see, of hidden rebellion of an outward pretense toward being what the king desires, but an inner refusal actually to go along with him. So, in view of this, the final pronouncement of our Lord is that he was cast out into the outer darkness, where men weep and gnash their teeth. "For," he says, "many are called, but few are chosen."

Many have wondered what that sentence means. Sometimes you hear it paraphrased, "Many are cold, and few are frozen," and that is getting fairly close to the truth of it. What our Lord says, literally, is, "Many are called, but few are called out." The words are related.

There are many adherents of Christianity, but there are few who actually become disciples. There are many who are willing to come without a wedding garment, they are at the scene of the wedding feast, in the presence of the fellowship of the saints with the Son, but they themselves do not actually enter in.

You can see how accurately and incisively descriptive this is of those who are present with the people of God, who profess Christianity, who are there Sunday after Sunday along with all the others, singing the hymns and reading the Scriptures, bowing their heads together at the right time. Yet they sustain an inner rebellion in their hearts, an inner refusal to accept the gift of righteousness of Jesus Christ. Instead they cling to something in themselves upon which they are depending for favor before God, and they refuse to heed the authority and acknowledge the lordship of Jesus Christ. For these the sentence is, "Bind them hand and foot, and cast them into the outer darkness; ... For many are called, but few are chosen."

You often hear people say, "The reason I don't go to church is that there are so many hypocrites there." Well, there are hypocrites in the churches. There is not one of us who is not a hypocrite, in one way or another. But what our Lord is focusing upon here is the initial entrance into the relationship of fellowship with the Son of God. That must be based solely upon the gift of righteousness, the gift of justification by faith. If we do not have that, then there is no possibility of development in the Christian life. Our Lord is highlighting for us the fact that we are dealing with God, who sees our hearts and knows our inner thoughts -- everything about us.

This is particularly significant and pertinent as we come to the table of the Lord, because, here, we are dealing with something which can easily be used as a mask, a guise of Christianity. All of us can partake of the table of the Lord. All of us can eat the bread and drink the wine. But God is watching the heart. He is looking to see whether that heart has really accepted the gift of life and has genuinely entered into an understanding of the joy, the gladness, and the glory that it is to know Jesus Christ.

We were singing earlier this morning a song that I love very much. A verse in it says,

He breaks the power of canceled sin,
He sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the foulest clean;
His blood availed for me.

Those words always speak to my heart because I have such a sense of having been cleansed, of having been foul, dirty, filthy, and of needing every day the cleansing of the blood of Jesus Christ. That is what this Communion table speaks of.

And God will be examining our hearts as we meet together here. That is why the Scriptures tell us not to treat this lightly, not to treat the table of the Lord as though it were a mere perfunctory ritual, for God is reading the attitude and the reaction of the heart as we participate together.

It is not the will of God to cast anyone out. He has made full provision for a wedding garment for us all. But only those who actually put it on will enter into the joy of the Lord at a time like this. As we participate together in this central sacrament of the Christian faith, will you be asking yourself these questions:

- What is the reaction of my heart to all of this?
- Is there joy there?
- Do I really know the glory of a cleansed life?
- Has God washed away any sins of mine?
- Am I free from my dark, sordid past?
- Is my inner life cleansed, as well as my outer life?
- Has God brought me into the place where I can rejoice and discover the joy of the Holy Spirit?

If you cannot say, "Yes," then I suggest that you face the Lord Jesus on other terms. Say to him, "Lord, until now I've been pretending to be a Christian. Up to now I've been doing all the outward, expected things. But I have never really trusted you. I've never really accepted from you the gift of life. Until now I've wanted to run my own life. I have wanted to be my own boss, make my own plans, and do all the things that I want to do. But now, Lord Jesus, I bow to your authority, to your right to be my Lord, and I thank you for your willingness to change me, to love me, and to lead me into the experience of life."

Will you pray that way?

Prayer

Our Holy Father, thank you for the significance of this feast to which we come today. How luminous it becomes in the light of these words of the Lord Jesus. This is the feast intended to symbolize all the good things of life -- joy and peace and righteousness. And Lord, as we come to it, we pray that we may be honest, sincere, open, and transparent before you. We come, Lord, not because we feel that we have anything to offer. We partake only on the grounds that we have nothing in ourselves, but all things in you. And, Lord Jesus, we thank you for this. We pray that this will move our hearts and that we will experience anew what it means to be set free from the weight of guilt for our sins, to be forgiven, to be restored to be given the gift of life in Jesus Christ and to walk with him in daily fellowship. We thank you in his name, Amen.

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