

The Life of Christ

*Sponsored by:
The Christadelphians*

*Learn to Read the Bible Effectively
Life of Christ Seminar
Week 6 - Growing opposition to the
Messiah*

SECTION 18

The Parables of the Seed

Not too long after Jesus had presented the Sermon on the Mount, He began to make much greater use of Parables as a form of teaching. The method of such teaching was quite familiar to the Jews who were instructed by the Rabbis in this manner.

In this lesson we will digress from the record of the events during Jesus' ministry, and address in particular a group of Parables that Jesus delivered on one occasion by the Sea of Galilee. Mark states that a very great multitude had gathered to Jesus as He was preaching by the sea. This crowd was so large that He got into a boat, and preached to them who remained on the land. Mark then says:

“...He was teaching them many things in Parables...”

Matthew, in particular, details a long list of them given on that day. Some were spoken on the boat, and three were given to the Disciples when Jesus had sent the people away and returned to the house.

All of the Parables recorded in the 13th chapter of Matthew are Parables of the Kingdom. They were a vindication of words spoken to the Scribes earlier that day when Jesus had stated to them “...the Kingdom of God has come upon you.” (Matthew 12:28)

A Parable is a comparison, or a simile, specifically described as a short narrative making a moral or religious point by comparison with other things. By presenting a lesson in this manner, it is easier to comprehend because of the example provided by the comparison, and is easier to remember because of the narrative form in which it is presented.

Whenever studying the Parables of Christ, we should remember that it is the lesson we are looking for. The story from which the lesson is drawn is not presented as a factual record and should not be regarded as such. But the lessons are powerful and impactful.

Quite often Parables can be identified as such by the way Jesus introduces them. He will begin His remarks with phrases such as “there was a certain town,” or “there was a certain man.” We find an example of this in Luke, chapter 16, where Jesus presented two Parables that were designed to provide lessons regarding the love of money, a characteristic which the Pharisees manifested. (Luke 16:14)

Jesus introduced both the Parables of the Unjust Steward and the Rich man and Lazarus with the phrase “there was a certain rich man.” (Luke 16:1, 19)

Another introduction common to many Parables was “the Kingdom of God is like,” a man, a mustard seed, etc. (Examples: Mark 4:26, 30, 31)

On frequent occasions Jesus’ disciples asked Him to explain the Parables later. (Example: Mark 4:10) He then provided them with the message that was intended along with the significance of the individual components in the Parable. (Example: Mark 4: 14-20)

Jesus also provided His disciples with an explanation regarding His use of Parables:

“...To you has been given the mystery of the Kingdom of God; but those who are outside get everything in Parables, in order that while seeing, they may see and not perceive; and while hearing, they may hear and not understand lest they return and be forgiven.” Mark 4:11, 12

It is important to notice that this inability to see and understand is confined by the Lord to “them that are without.” Those gathering around Jesus at that time, while He was preaching, were sharply divided between those who were His Disciples, or sympathetic hearers, and those who were His implacable enemies. His Parables would have a very different effect upon these two groups. Those who desired to be instructed regarding the Kingdom, would receive them thoughtfully. If they found anything too difficult, they would seek Him out with the request for an explanation. Thus, they would gradually learn, in a way they could never forget, the mysteries of the Kingdom.

But in the heart of His enemies there would be no such desire. Their careful attention was due to an anxiety to take hold of some word upon which they could condemn Him. They saw and they heard, but their failure to perceive and understand was the result of their deliberate blindness and hardness of heart.

In this lesson, we have elected to address specifically the Parables of the Sower, Seeds, and Leaven which Jesus presented by the Sea of Galilee on the day recorded in Matthew, chapter 13. These have been selected because they relate so directly to lessons regarding the word that Jesus was preaching at that time. In this regard the Parable of the Sower is especially significant. About this Parable, Jesus said to His Disciples:

“...Do you not understand this Parable? And how will you understand all the Parables?” Mark 4:13

It contains an important key to unlock all the Parables. It is based on what men think, feel and do about God and His Word.

The Sower - Matthew 13:3-23

In Israel, the farmer sowing his seed took his bag of grain, slung by a strap from his shoulder, and walked up and down his field, scattering handfuls of seed as he went. Where the seed fell, it stayed. Its final fate depended upon the quality of the soil where it fell. The Sower, of course, represents Jesus Christ, the Son of Man. (Matthew 13:37)

In relating to Jesus as the Sower, we realize that He is God's Son and spokesman. In order to draw maximum personal benefit out of this Parable, we are well advised, when prayerfully reading it, to picture the position of the One whom this Sower represents. As we think of Jesus, spreading the word to His listeners and to us, think of the words with which the writer to the Hebrews describes Him in introducing his letter. (Hebrews 1:1-4)

Soil Conditions

This has even greater impact when we realize that the seed sown is the Word of God. (Luke 8:11), and that the four soil conditions are four sorts of people who react in different ways to the Word of God.

1. The Path: The wayside, roadway or path was trodden hard, as some people's minds are by sinful thoughts and ways. They hear the word of the Kingdom, but it is immediately forgotten as the things of the world drive it from their minds. It is as if birds came and devoured the word before they could absorb it. No emotional spark is kindled by the seed on the path. The failure is in the mind and attitude of the receiver.

2. The Stony Places: An inch or two of earth on a rock base fosters quick growth while moisture exists, but nothing can endure there. Hearers of God's Word can be shallow people in the same manner. Swayed by excitement or emotion, they say they understand the truth of the Word, but they embrace an illusion. They do not understand what they hear, accepting it in the emotional excitement of the moment. Lacking inward resolve, they are soon offended and fall away. (Matthew 13:20, 21) Their failure is one of emotion.

3. The Thorns: Weeds such as thorns grow prolifically, outpacing food crops with ease. In the same manner, life's cares, ambition, and greed can swamp everything and submerge all other thoughts. Individuals like this have understood the truth of Jesus' Words, and an emotional response has been kindled in them. Their energy is channeled into worldly ways, however, and they do not produce fruit. It is important to get our priorities right. Wheat matters. Weeds do not matter. In this case, the Heavenly Father, His Son and the Gospels are not given a high priority, but are left to fit in any time that is left over after the things of the world have been satisfied. (Compare Matthew 6:24-34) The failure has to do with priorities and life choices.

4. Good Ground: This is distinguished from the other three by its complete fruitfulness. Such a person hears the Word, understands, and accepts it joyfully with a full commitment and brings forth fruit in the service of the Lord. Thoughts, feelings, actions, are all given in God's service. Only one kind of soil will produce the necessary fruit. Jesus wanted His listeners to know that the decision regarding what kind of soil they would be rests with them personally.

Jesus then proceeded to deliver further Parables providing different lessons relating to the Sower, the seed, and the soil.

Wheat and Tares - Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43

In this Parable, it is not the soil, but the seed sown that holds the lesson. The Sower of the good seed is Jesus Christ. His work of sowing the seed of the Word completed, He ascended to His Father, leaving the care of His fields, (the world), in the hands of His servants, the Apostles and subsequent Disciples, from that time until now.

The work of faith that they performed bore fruit, for “God causes the growth.” They were laborers together with God. (Compare 1 Cor. 3:6-9) The fruit consisted of brothers and sisters of Christ, made such by belief of the Gospel, and baptism into Christ. The “good seed” produced “good fruit.” These become the children of the Kingdom.

During the night (that is, during the Lord’s absence) while the Sower’s men slept, tares or weeds were mixed in with the good seed. We might compare the “sleeping” with the end of the Apostolic Age, following the death of Christ’s chosen servants, the Apostles.

Throughout the years, tares, or weeds, became mixed in with the good seed. These would be individuals who agreed with the concept of the truth of God, but having no true inward contrition or repentance, they were still dominated by the lusts of the flesh.

Tares and wheat appear to be identical at the first sight, but closer examination shows that the tares are coarse by comparison, and lack fruit. Wheat is full of grain, but tares have only a few grains in a large mature ear. They are valueless, simply cluttering the ground, and poisonous. Their seed, if mixed with wheat flour and eaten, can cause nausea, convulsions, even death. They are, therefore, a suitable symbol for people who seem to accept the Gospel, and who govern their behavior with enough care and cunning to fool the true followers of Christ until the time of the harvest.

The judgment will expose their coarseness and lack of fruit. Such people are not openly wicked, or heretics, because they would be rejected immediately by sincere disciples of Christ. (Compare 1 Cor. 5:13; Titus 3:10)

The tares are people whose presence among the believers is a religious front, but whose true love is worldliness and pleasure and whose voice would lead others to the broad way of destruction.

The children of the Kingdom may have well-founded suspicions as to the tares in their midst, but they could in some cases be wrong. If they were uprooted, others, not necessarily tares, within the circle of their influence would also be uprooted.

So, Christ commands: “Allow both to grow together until the harvest,” (verse 30), which He then amplified in the very graphic words of verses 40 to 43.

At His second coming, Christ, possessing infallible judgment, will distinguish tares from wheat and will destroy them. In contrast, as the wheat was gathered into the barn, so the righteous will be received into brilliant honor into God’s Kingdom.

The Mustard Seed - Matthew 13: 31, 32

The astonishing thing about the mustard seed is that it produces a plant that is vastly out of proportion to its own size. It is a very tiny seed but the plant grows to a height of 8 or 10 feet. Its branches are filled with seeds to which birds flock for food.

The mustard seed, because of its small beginning and its final glory, very appropriately illustrates the call of the Gospel.

Out of the small beginning made by the preaching of the Gospel, great things would emerge. In the Kingdom, Christ and the family of Saints will distribute to the world the seed of salvation. The Parable illustrates this by referring to the birds of the air, an emblem of nations, coming and lodging in the tree. (Echo - Daniel 4:12),

Jesus, “despised and rejected of men,” (Isaiah 53:3), “the Apostles...as men condemned to death,” (1 Cor. 4:9), the Disciples, each required to “deny himself, and take up his cross,” (Matthew 16:24), all provided a small beginning.

The world will be astonished when all these appear in glory as rulers and teachers (Isaiah 53:12; Matthew 19:27-30; James 2:5)

Leaven - Matthew 13:33

The leaven used in Christ’s day was a piece of dough left over from the last baking day and allowed to go sour. Leaven has two major qualities. It corrupts and it penetrates. Its power to corrupt makes it a fit symbol for “malice and wickedness” (1 Cor. 5:8) and for the negative influence of false doctrine (Matthew 16:12).

Like the Parable of the Tares, while Christ has been away the false doctrines of Christianity have spread like leaven. Small as it was, its influence spread irresistibly.

LESSONS FOR US

We can all produce fruit unto God by following the lessons that Jesus provided in these Parables. The seed sown will inevitably secure the destiny marked out for it.

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth, and making it bear and sprout, and furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; So shall my word be which goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it” Isaiah 55:10, 11

SECTION 19

Third Passover

We now return to the Gospel of John and his record of Jesus' ministry. (Chapter 6) Twelve months had passed since the healing of the impotent man in Jerusalem. Jesus and His Disciples had resumed their work in Galilee, and they had enjoyed great popularity. During that time notable events and miracles had taken place, which have been recorded all or in part by the other 3 Gospel writers.

Jesus had amazed His Disciples through the calming of a stormy sea. He had healed the insane Gadarene man. Jairus' daughter had been raised and the woman with the continuing hemorrhage had been healed. Sight had been restored to blind men and a mute was enabled to speak.

During a brief visit to Nazareth, Jesus had been once again rejected by His former townspeople.

He had sent out His 12 Apostles as six pairs for them to preach on their own. For this preaching task He had endowed temporarily them with Divine powers of healing like His own. This provided a foreshadow of events subsequently described in the Acts of the Apostles.

The imprisoned John the Baptist was beheaded by Herod during this same year.

Each of these records contains significant elements of Christ's ministry, and messages for His followers, and subsequently to us. Unfortunately, it is impossible for us to cover every aspect of Jesus' life in this course.

Following that year, opposition was soon to set in. But for the moment, despite occasional problems, progress was being made without any interference..

At the point at which we pick up John's narrative in chapter 6, the six pairs of Apostles had returned from their mission of preaching the need for repentance and healing the sick. They reported to Jesus what they had done and what they had taught, but they also brought the sad news regarding John the Baptist. (Mark 6:7-30)

The Herald of the King had done his work faithfully, and his death, while received by Jesus with deep grief, would also remind Him of the trials and tragedy that lay before Him in the final year of His mortal life.

There was too much activity in Capernaum for quiet meditation, and to take stock. So, Jesus said to His Apostles:

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“...Come away by yourselves, to a lonely place and rest a while. (For there were many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat).” Mark 6:31

They, therefore, went by boat privately, crossing the lake to Bethsaida. (Luke 9:10)

John then records the fourth and fifth of the eight signs of his Gospel. These provide beautiful illustrations that Jesus Christ is the bread of life, and the only one able to still the storm and lead His people to salvation in the Kingdom of God. The fourth sign, providing strong lessons for Israel, reveals that spiritually the Jews for the most part were unable to achieve the level of spiritual response to which Jesus was endeavoring to lead His followers. In its aftermath, we begin to see a decline in public favor which introduced Jesus to His final year of service, a period of growing opposition.

All four Gospel writers record the miracle that John includes as his fourth sign. (Matt. 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6: 1-14)

The fifth sign (John 6:15-21), is included by Matthew (14:22-30), and Mark (6:45-52).

We will use the continuity of John’s narrative to consider these two signs.

The Multitude Follows

When Jesus arrived at Bethsaida with His Disciples, He took them up into a mountain. The multitude had seen them go, however, and they hurried on foot around the head of the lake to find Jesus on the other side. Their search for Him was obviously born of a desire for the miracles of healing that they had seen Him perform. (John 6:1-4)

When Jesus saw the approaching throng, He was moved with compassion toward them because they were as sheep not having a shepherd. He began to teach them many things. (Mark 6:34)

The work of teaching went on well into the day until it became quite late. It was then evident to the Disciples that in the deserted area in which they were now located, such large numbers of people would require food. From where would it come, they wondered? (Mark 6:35, 36)

In this setting, we see the detail that John provides in establishing the significance of the signs that he records. In describing this he makes note of the fact that the Passover Feast was near at hand. (John 6:4)

Passover commemorated Israel’s exodus from Egypt, when God sustained the nation in the wilderness with manna; or bread from Heaven. John makes certain that his readers grasp the significance of this echo.

The people had left comfortable cities to come into a deserted area in search of God’s goodness manifested in Jesus. The children of Israel had followed Moses, a type of Christ, out of Egypt into the wilderness.

This scene at Bethsaida re-captured the circumstances and spirit of the exodus. As the One who was “the true bread” (verse 32), and “the bread of life” (verse 35), Jesus would make this plain by feeding them.

The Disciples had determined that there was available only five barley loaves and two fish to feed these 5,000 men – a crowd of probably 10,000 people or more.

The Fourth Sign - John 6:10-14

The Lord directed the multitude to be seated in a place where there was “much grass.” (A subtle reminder of the season related to Passover, and Jesus as the Good Shepherd leading his people to ‘green pastures’) Jesus lifted His voice in thanks to God, and He held up the bread and fishes, and broke them, handing them to His Disciples, who in turn gave them to the multitude.

In this manner distribution continued until everyone present was filled. On Jesus’ instruction, the Disciples gathered up the remaining fragments filling 12 baskets with pieces of the 5 Barley loaves which were left over. Mark’s words catch the drama of the Lord’s actions:

“...Looking up toward Heaven, He blessed the food and broke the loaves...” Mark 6:41

We see a direct foreshadow of Jesus breaking bread and sharing it at the institution of the Memorial Supper just prior to the crucifixion. At the Passover Feast, just a year after the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus would take bread, break it, give it to His Disciples and say:

“Take, eat; this is my body.” Matt. 26:26

The feeding of the 5,000 at Bethsaida provided a symbol for the Lord’s great sacrifice on behalf of humanity, a body given, that sin might be condemned and that God’s righteousness might be openly declared. Even the manner of distribution by His Disciples provides a significance and foreshadowing. After the Lord’s ascension, the word of life handed on to the Apostles and Disciples, was distributed by them to the people.

Care was to be taken that “nothing be lost” of the food which had been miraculously multiplied. (John 6:12) This was to teach that the word of life was to be carefully preserved and distributed to those who hungered and thirsted after righteousness.

Twelve baskets were left over, one for each of the twelve Apostles, those who would be sent forth to distribute the word. Twelve also stands for the tribes of Israel, to whom the wonderful message of the true bread of life would first be preached. (Acts 26:7)

The miracle had been designed to reveal Divine care for those who would follow Jesus and depend on His Father. But on that day in Bethsaida, this eager multitude missed the message that was being provided.

Then, as it has been throughout the ages, men and women can be so intent on their own view point, that they miss God's intent. The Jews were eager to throw off the Roman yoke, and as a first step in this direction, they would have welcomed another Moses to free them from foreign domination and give them food to eat. They certainly saw the striking resemblance between Moses and Jesus and declared that this was "the Prophet who is to come into the world." (John 6:14; compare Deut. 18:15, 18, 19)

Jesus perceived that their only thoughts related to a Nationalistic desire to make Him King, by force if necessary. So, He withdrew again to the mountain by Himself, alone. (John 6:15)

The Fifth Sign - John 6:16-21

As Jesus was preparing to go up into the mountain alone, He told His Disciples to get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side to Bethsaida. It is probable that the Apostles were also being affected by the mass excitement of Jesus' popularity. He obviously wanted to be alone for the time being and desired to remove them from this influence. The scene was set for the next miracle, or sign, that John perceived as presenting a significant message to Jesus' true followers.

To avoid confusion, it should be noted that there were two towns called Bethsaida, one near the point at which He had fed the 5,000 and the other, across the lake close to Capernaum. It was to this latter location that He now sent the Disciples. (Mark 6:45-46)

They had only six or seven miles to go, but it was late when they started, and a wind storm arose. The winds were obviously strong enough that their sails were made useless and we have a picture of them struggling to row against these heavy winds and high waves. (John 6:16-19) With characteristic significance John records:

"It had already become dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them"

We can very quickly see a foreshadowing of the time when Jesus would ascend to His Father. It would be necessary for them to struggle through a stormy world of sin and darkness without His physical presence. In the midst of perils, they would find blessings for themselves, and for all who subsequently followed them, because they would believe Jesus was with them, although they could not see Him.

In that dark hour, Jesus came to them, miraculously walking upon the water. Their cries of fear brought Him towards them. Immediately came the reassuring response:

"...It is I, do not be afraid." John 6:20

Typically, it is impetuous Peter who calls back to Him across the water, anxious to show his love and confidence: Matthew 14:28

"...Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water."

Confidently, he clambered over the side of the boat and walked toward His Lord. But he did not keep the beginning of his confidence firm until the end. His eyes left his Master's face, and looked fearfully out into the boisterous night and the swirling waters below him. In that moment his faith had gone and he began to sink.

He cried out for help, and immediately Jesus was there. Stretching out His hand, Jesus lifted him up out of the water, and together they walked back to the safety of the ship. (Matt. 14:30-32)

Peter's failure was not in his decision to join the Lord, but in his loss of confidence, during the turmoil and turbulence of his walk toward Him.

The Disciples gladly received them into the boat, and immediately they were safely at their destination. (John 6:21)

Many lessons emerge from this night on the sea. They are not limited to the benefit of His Apostles alone. Life for all of us can at times present a picture of a dark and turbulent sea, feeling that Jesus is far from us. Sometimes His help comes to us in the midst of the storm and darkness of our lives, coming in an unfamiliar form which we must learn to recognize. As we strive to get closer to Him and His Father in our hearts, we slowly learn that we should not be dismayed by the darkness, the winds, or the waves as we walk in faith. We must believe that His power is far greater, and that He can save us in the uttermost circumstances. Our faith can only be sustained by keeping our eyes fixed lovingly and obediently upon Him.

When we do fail, however, we are comforted in the knowledge that we have but to cry out to Him and He is there, stretching out His hand to lift us up

Finally, there is a foreshadowing of Jesus' return in this miracle, as we perceive the troubled times prior to that **Great Day**. Even now in the turbulence in the nations and the people throughout the world we see the sea and the waves roaring. As we see conditions such as those that existed in the days of Sodom and Gomorrah, and in the time of Noah, prior to God's judgment, we see men's hearts failing, their resources spent. In the last watch of the night, the Son will leave His Father's presence and come with His word of peace to those who yearn for Him. And with Him will come the dawn, and the desired haven of the Kingdom age.

The Bread of Life - John 6:22-69

The next day, the multitude who had been fed in the vicinity of Bethsaida Julias, returned to that spot. They knew that the Disciples had departed in their boat, and were obviously aware that Jesus had not gone with them at that time. They would have reason to believe that He was still in the vicinity.

Unable to find Him, they apparently reasoned that He must have rejoined His Disciples at Capernaum somehow. Utilizing small boats that came from Tiberius, they went to Capernaum seeking Jesus. (John 6:22-25)

Realizing the true reason for their efforts in locating Him, Jesus said to them:

“...Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves, and were filled. Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man shall give to you, for on Him, the Father, even God, has set His seal” John 6:27

Jesus endeavored to instruct them regarding the correct approach demanded by God of those who would come to Him. Their lives must be directed to Spiritual objects, not carnal ones. They must learn that the greatest “work” that one can offer God is to have faith, that is, to believe in Jesus whom God has sent.

They must cease from demanding signs and accept Him as “the bread of life” if they are to live forever. (John 6:26-40)

This had been the message in the echo regarding the children of Israel that had been provided to them in the miraculous provision of food the day before. As a result of it they tried to make Him King because they wanted assurance of food, the bread that perishes. In a single gesture, Jesus now swept away the enthusiasm that came from that miracle. It had dazzled their eyes, and diverted their attention from the true bread.

What they had received the day before would temporarily sustain them, but it would be nothing in a brief span of time. Their only hope lay in laboring for that food which His Father had sent Him into the world to give. The food that is not subject to change and decay, but endures as a transforming power, issuing finally into everlasting life.

They could not accept the fact that He was the true bread and had been sent by God to fulfill this purpose. They began to murmur and grumble, just as the children of Israel had done in the wilderness so many centuries before, despite the “miraculous manna,” which God had provided to sustain them.

Jesus explained that their rejection of Him was the natural outcome of their rejection of God. (John 6:43-51) He was the living bread which they were to eat:

“...If anyone eats of this bread, he shall live forever; and the bread also which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.” John 6:51

The vast majority were unable to accept or understand the spiritual application of His message:

“This is a difficult statement; who can listen to it?” John 6:60

This marked the beginning of the turning point regarding His popularity among the multitudes:

“As a result of this many of His Disciples withdrew, and were not walking with Him anymore.” John 6:66

The twelve Apostles remained faithful to Him, with their allegiance being expressed through the spokesman Peter.

“Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God.” John 6:68-69

Even as they professed their loyalty to Him, Jesus presented a foreshadow of what was to come saying that even one of them was a “devil,” who would betray Him. (John 6:67-71)

LESSON FOR US

When Jesus said “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink His blood, you have no life in you” (John 6:53), he meant in the sense of absorbing and making His thoughts, His words, and His deeds a part of ourselves. The Greek “trogo,” used in verses 54, 56, 57 and 58 means to eat in the sense of “chewing thoroughly.”

The message to that multitude, and to us, is that we are to inwardly digest the words which Jesus delivered. In so doing we become enlightened in Divine ways and are sustained in our walk toward the Kingdom.

Similarly, when we become associated with Him through baptism, we are required to “eat the flesh” and “drink the blood” of the Lord Jesus Christ. He becomes a part of us, and so, we reflect upon the glory of His Father, just as Jesus Himself did.

Jesus had provided a sign. The spiritual importance of it was lost on most of them at that time. We should seek the Father’s blessing in requesting that we will be preserved from a similar fate. 1 Corinthians 10:15-17

“I speak as to wise men; you judge what I say. Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread.”

SECTION 20

Feast of Tabernacles

His second year, one of growing popularity, began with the miracle at the pool of Bethesda, on the occasion of His second Passover and ended with the feeding of the 5,000 about the time of His 3rd Passover. Admiration and popularity throughout this period were widespread, but the attitude of Israel's leaders hardened toward Him. They realized that He was a man to be feared, and they watched Him closely.

Our Lord's final year was one of increasing bitterness toward Him, as He pursued the pathway that was to lead to His death. We note His concern for His Disciples, His desire to instruct, and prepare them for the sacrifices they would also be required to make in the work of redemption. It is an example of selflessness that should inspire our own service before Him.

When the 5,000 were fed miraculously, Jesus began to challenge the people to see their need for the word of God and its discipline. They were not prepared to change, and His popularity waned sharply. He warned Disciples and listeners alike of the life to be lived and the attitudes to be respected if they would obtain salvation. Many of them, believing themselves already free from sin, were incensed at Him and angry words followed.

After many of His followers left Him, (John 6:66), the period of opposition began in earnest.

The feeding of the 5,000 and the incidents in Capernaum had taken place about the time of the 3rd Passover. After a tour of Phoenicia, He continued preaching and healing in the area of Decapolis. It was here that the miracle of the loaves and fishes was repeated, but this time to a group of over 4,000 Gentile listeners. Jesus instructed His Disciples that, in God's Will, it was as important to save Gentiles as it was to save Jews. He then traveled by boat across the Sea of Galilee to Magdala in Dalmanutha. (Mark 8:10)

Upon arrival they were confronted by a deputation of self-centered haughty Pharisees and materialistic Sadducees. They demanded a sign that would serve to authenticate His mission among them. (Matthew 16:1-4) Jesus knew that they were hypocrites and referred to them as an evil and adulterous generation. Abruptly He left them, and departed, refusing to work in their midst.

In departing He told them that the only sign that they would receive would be that of the Prophet Jonah. In Israel's history, God directed Jonah to preach to the Gentiles of Nineveh when such work in Israel was proving ineffective. (Reference - Book of Jonah) Jesus had provided His confronts with a significant echo which obviously they missed.

Jonah was a type of Christ. When his preaching was rejected in Israel, he was swallowed by a great fish at sea. He spent 3 days in the belly of the fish before being vomited on to dry land. Nineveh repented of its evil due to Jonah's subsequent preaching and was preserved. These Gentiles later became a desolator of Israel. This echo regarding Nineveh was also a foreshadow of Gentile Rome's destruction of the Jewish state in A.D. 70.

After leaving Magdala, Jesus took great pains to warn His Disciples regarding the Pharisees and Sadducees. He wanted to make sure that the Apostles were clear about His own identity as the Son of God, and give them an indication of what He and they were going to experience in the future. (Matt. 16:5-28)

As followers of Christ's teachings, we should all take note of the great challenge in Discipleship that Matthew recorded in verses 24-26 of this chapter. We might picture Him speaking to each one of us:

- 1. Deny yourself → self must be dethroned in order that God might be exalted.**
- 2. Take up His cross → worldly comforts should be set aside in favour of expressing concern for others more than self**
- 3. Follow Jesus Christ → not just sacrifice for its own sake, but with the motives and desire for serving God as revealed by Christ in His own life.**

The antagonism against Jesus continued to grow as the time grew closer for His death and departure from the Jewish people.

We now return to the record of John (7:2-9). He records Jesus' decision regarding the Feast of Tabernacles (Booths), which was held in the 7th month. This feast was drawing near. It preceded Passover by six months. This was all the time now left to Him.

The Decision

Jesus had spent about six months in Galilee where He was more generally accepted. He had not visited Judea in that period, being aware that plans were being laid for His death. This news reached Jesus at the time of preparation for the special annual Feast of rejoicing, the Feast of Tabernacles. It celebrated the nation's deliverance from Egypt under Moses. It also marked the final gathering of the harvest reminding everyone of the loving and gracious hand of God. (John 7:1, 2)

His Relatives

Members of Jesus' family prepared to go to Jerusalem for the Feast. It appears that they were doubtful about Jesus. They considered that He conducted Himself in a secretive manner, urging Him to go to the Feast so that He could openly declare Himself. In this they were suggesting that He go into the one area that reflected intensely the adverse

attitude of the Priests, and the greatest amount of hostility was directed toward Him. We might detect an element of sarcasm in their suggestion, as John records:

“For not even His brothers were believing in Him.” John 7:5

Jesus’ response was significant. His “time was not yet come.” (John 7:6) He was not yet prepared to make known His intentions regarding Himself. He urged them to go without Him. (John 7:6-8)

Jesus waited in Capernaum until after their departure. Then, with His Disciples, with whom He still wished to spend private time, He departed for the Feast.

While Jesus was traveling, His absence in Jerusalem caused more disturbance than His presence. The Jewish rulers searched for Him. They were now determined to arrest him. Unable to find Him they asked each other, “Where is He?” There was equal speculation, but without such a decision, among the people. Many said “He is a good man.” Others said, “No, He leads the multitude astray.” Much murmuring prevailed, but to this point no one was speaking openly about Him. (John 7:11-13)

We can well understand the commotion and the mixed emotions that were prevailing in Jerusalem at that time. This city and the Temple contained the center of antagonism toward Him. But there would be many visitors to the city at this time, many of whom would have nothing but praise for Him, especially those from Galilee.

Jesus had been away from Jerusalem for a long time. During the interval the whole of Galilee had acclaimed Him. He found it necessary to restrain the people from making Him King and marching with Him into Jerusalem. He had shown miraculous powers in dealing with individuals and multitudes. Only the Disciples had received insight into what lay before Him in Jerusalem regarding His death. The great majority still clung to the hope that He would manifest Himself in power at the right moment. The appearance of Jesus in Jerusalem at one of the great Feasts held a potential for great significance.

The Jewish rulers awaited His coming with apprehension. Some people were hoping and some were fearing. The Galileans would anticipate His arrival joyfully, convinced of His intentions. The people of Jerusalem, absorbing the opinion of the Priests, would answer that He was a deceiver. The great Feast was half over when Jesus arrived. He went into the Temple and began to teach. (John 7:14)

Discourse in the Temple - John 7:14-36

The people hearing Jesus were immediately impressed, and wondered among themselves whether the failure of the rulers to apprehend Him was explained by their knowledge that He was, indeed, the Messiah. (John 7:25, 26) But they were perplexed by the lack of mystery that surrounded His origin. (Verse 27)

Jesus pointed beyond the beginnings which they thought they knew, to the real purpose of His coming and the identity of the One who sent Him. This was their fatal ignorance:

“...You both know me and know where I am from; and I have not come of myself, but He who sent me is true, whom you do not know.” John 7:28

Such statements always provoked the rulers of Israel. The Pharisees became intent on seizing Him. But they hesitated, and did not take Him, because His hour had not yet come. (John 7:30) The people were obviously quick to notice this hesitation and believed in Him:

“...When the Christ shall come, He will not perform more signs than those which this man has, will He?” John 7:31

Seeing the growing influence of Jesus over the people, but realizing their own inadequacy to deal with it, the Pharisees sought the co-operation of their enemies. The Chief Priests obliged sending the Temple police to take Him. (John 7:32)

But Jesus was not taken. He told the people that He was only going to be with them for a short while, and then going away to the One who had sent Him. When He had taken that journey, they would seek Him but not find Him. (John 7:33-36)

The Messiah had been in their midst. They would reject Him, and their opportunity would be gone.

The Last Day of the Feast - John 7:37-53

The Feast of Tabernacles came to its climax in a “Holy convocation” on the 8th day. (Lev. 23:35-44) A convocation was a meeting of a religious nature involving ceremonial activities.

On each of the first seven days of the Feast, there was an impressive ceremony of water pouring. Priests went in a procession to the pool of Siloam. They filled a golden vessel with water, carried it to the Temple Court, and emptied it out (with wine also) at the altar. (Foreshadowing - water mixed with blood on the cross)

The water pouring ceremony was intended as a reminder of Israel’s wilderness journey, when God saved them from perishing by providing an abundant supply of water from a rock that had been struck. The discontinuing of water pouring on this 8th day of the Feast was designed to remind Israel that after the wilderness wandering, God gave them their land of promise, “a land of brooks of water.” (Deut. 8:7)

On this day, Jesus was now to remind them that their hearts were still dried up for the want of the true water of life. The “smitten rock” was, of course, a foreshadowing of Jesus Christ Himself. It was a fitting moment for Jesus to step forward and make His great proclamation:

“...If any man is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, from his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.” John 7:37, 38

Once more His words caused strife and divided opinions. Many proclaimed Him to be the Prophet, others, the Christ. There is a strange irony in the fact that there were some who refused to believe at all because the Messiah should be the seed of David, and be born in Bethlehem. Even these points they had missed. (John 7:40-43)

Presently the Temple Officers returned to the rulers empty-handed. Going to arrest Him, they had been overwhelmed with the power of Christ's teaching. They left Him, to confess their failure to their own masters:

"...Never did a man speak the way this man speaks." John 7:46

The Pharisees vented their disappointment and bitterness on the Temple Soldiers. "So, this man had managed to defeat them too! Is it not enough that the rulers refused to accept Him? The people doubtless are moved, but they know nothing of the law and are cursed." (John 7:47,48)

Quite unexpectedly, the quiet voice of Nicodemus intervened. He was the one who had previously visited Jesus. His knowledge of Him and his own sense of justice prevailed. He showed how wrong the Pharisees were. It was not true that none of the rulers believed in Jesus. It was the Pharisees, not the people, who appeared to be ignorant of the law by condemning a man without hearing him or considering his claims. The rest of the Pharisees challenged him. There is no record of Nicodemus accepting that challenge and proclaiming any allegiance to Jesus at that time. (John 7:50-52)

Preaching in Jerusalem - John 8 through 10:21

Following the Feast of Tabernacles, the rulers of Israel left the Temple for the comfort of their own homes. The Messiah left the Temple and climbed the slopes of Olivet, no doubt to commune with His Father.

Early the next morning, Jesus was once more in the Temple. The people crowded to Him and He sat down to teach. Although the Feast was now over, it is probable that many of the worshippers stayed in the city because of the presence of Jesus. The events of the previous day had created a situation of tension. The Scribes and Pharisees obviously remained determined to apprehend Him, seeking only the smallest pretext. So far, their efforts had only brought humiliation upon themselves, but who could say when they would break through His defenses, enabling His arrest.

The Pharisees had not learned their lesson. They were embarrassed, but not discouraged and proceeded to investigate and confront Him. Their efforts began immediately that first morning in the Temple as they brought before Him a woman caught in adultery. Under the Law of Moses, this called for stoning to death. They would be reasonably certain that He would not allow her to be stoned, but either way they felt that they would be winners. If He rejected this penalty, they could accuse Him of denying the Law of Moses. If He endorsed it, He would incur the displeasure of the people for His inconsistency regarding love and mercy and could be faced with the political charge that He was challenging the prerogative of Rome regarding a death sentence.

His challenge to them left everyone speechless and they quietly dispersed:

“...He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” John 8:7

Left alone with the woman, He absolved her of condemnation and told her to go on her way and sin no more.

This incident has proved invaluable to all true followers of Christ throughout history. It is a graphic illustration of the Master’s words on the Mount, “judge not, that ye be not judged.” However damning the evidence might be against another Brother or Sister of Christ, if we pause and look into our own hearts, we shall go quietly away and leave them with the Lord. There are times when it becomes necessary to act, but that action is not taken because of condemnation. It will be taken in the painful consciousness of our own unworthiness, and with a love which will plead for help and intercession before the Throne of Grace. We shall wait with eagerness for the first signs of penitence.

Following this, a significant and revealing miracle on a Sabbath would provide the Pharisees with another opportunity for attack. This involved the curing of the man blind from birth. (John 9:1-41)

After the incident with the adulteress woman, Jesus continued to speak in the Temple. He proclaimed Himself to be “the Light of the world.” The claim was immediately repudiated by the Pharisees, and a verbal battle ensued which resulted in many of the people, and even some of the rulers believing in Him. But in most of them, it was a superficial faith which failed the test to which it was now exposed. The result of this discourse was that they picked up stones to throw at Him. Jesus went out of the Temple. (John 8:12-59)

The Blind Man

Once again John makes a point of carefully noting factors which relate to the 8 miracles of Jesus that he recorded as signs. Jesus had just declared Himself to be “the Light of the world.” Following and during the subsequent discourse, the Jews proved themselves to be blind to the Messiah and to the Light He provided. John carefully notes that it was at the conclusion of this discourse that Jesus encountered the man “blind from birth.” (John 9:1) Jesus indicated to His Disciples that His Father’s works would be manifested in this blind beggar. (John 9:4, 5) By his natural and spiritual sight, this beggar would be a witness to the Light of the world.

Jesus made clay of spittle and applied the clay to the man’s eyes. He then told him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam.” (John 9:6, 7) Without hesitation the man obeyed, blindly making his way through the narrow and crowded streets of the lower city.

John records simply:

“...So he went away and washed, and came back seeing.” John 9:7

The student is commended to a detailed study of the events that followed in this wonderful sign, seeking out the significance in the detail that John provides. In so doing, compare them with the considerations offered in the following lessons for us.

Attention is drawn to the fact that this man was thrust out of the Temple by the Religious leaders of his day. Jesus found him again, and the man demonstrated that he had received both spiritual and physical sight:

“...Lord, I believe. And he worshipped Him.” John 9:38

LESSON FOR US

This miracle presented by John as a sign relates to the claim that Jesus had made in the Temple a few hours before. It showed Him to be the Light of the world. The blind man begging at the gate of the Temple is a powerful symbol of the blindness and poverty of man, proclaiming his need at the gateway of the Kingdom. The power to fill his need is revealed by the coming of the Son of Man.

In the same manner, our blind eyes are touched by the ointment prepared by the mingling of the dust of the ground with the moisture from the mouth of Jesus who was sent from God. But this does not cure us. We receive the command to go and wash in the waters of discipleship. (John is careful to point out that Siloam mean “sent”) It is a long and difficult journey. Some do not undertake it at all. Some begin, only to give it up, and resume their begging at the gate. Often this journey is made shorter and easier by the friendly guidance of one who can see.

It is the responsibility of all those whose eyes are opened by Jesus - the Light of the World, to listen for the groping of the blind and the cry to be directed to the waters of Siloam.

Faith and obedience are rewarded. With the washing of the waters, (echo - baptism) we can enter a new world illuminated by the Son of Righteousness. This may mean rejection, persecution, and sacrifice, but it will also be an opportunity for witness and loyalty. Jesus will know. He will seek us out and invite us into a fellowship so deep and abiding that all the former relationships are like the phantom sounds and movements of the dark world from which we have been delivered.

“...For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see; and those who see may become blind.” John 9:39

SECTION 21

Parables of Redemption

The next few lessons will deal extensively with the last months of our Saviour's life on earth. The Gospel records covering this period provide great insights into Christ's purpose, His death, resurrection, and ascension. In earlier records of Christ's ministry, we often saw references to the fact that "His hour had not yet come." Now it had!

Throughout His ministry, Jesus remained focused upon the ultimate purpose of redemption which His Father had promised right back in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:15). The time to fulfill that promise through His Son had now come.

In view of this mighty work, it is fitting at this stage in our studies, to consider five powerful parables that Jesus provided regarding the redemption of sinners. They are recorded in Luke, chapters 15 and 16.

Wherever Jesus went, he drew to himself Publicans and Sinners, people looked upon as separated from the righteous by their means of livelihood and their way of life. It was one of the Pharisees' greatest problems. They could not understand the attitude of Jesus in allowing these men even to approach Him. That He should talk to them, and sink to the depravity of accepting their hospitality, was horrifying. They were overwhelmed with their contempt for these people and the sense of their own righteousness, which they felt was properly marked by separation from sinners.

This is the background to the circumstances that Luke describes in recording these "parables of redemption." Jesus' words were so powerful, that even those who had previously disregarded the Word of God pressed in to hear Him speak:

"Now all the tax-gatherers and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him." Luke 15:1

The Scribes and Pharisees did not like it and murmured among themselves:

"...This man receives sinners and eats with them." Luke 15:2

Jesus heard them and answered their remarks with these parables. They are not the simple tales they appear to be on the surface. On the one hand they were as deadly arrows aimed at the hearts of Jesus' enemies. On the other, they are precious words of comfort for sinners who repent. The five stories are not separate parables at all. Luke records that he told them "this parable." (Verse 3) Then follows with barely a break between them, Jesus' words regarding "the Lost Sheep," "the Lost Coin," "the Lost Son," "the Unjust Steward" and "the Rich Man and Lazarus."

The Lost Sheep - Luke 15:3-7

The Pharisees called those who did not keep the law “the people of the land.” The barrier between the Pharisees and such people was complete. These Religious leaders looked for such peoples’ destruction, not their restoration.

Contrasting their attitude to “lost” men and women was the attitude of a shepherd regarding even just one lost sheep out of a flock of 100. A shepherd fulfilled his responsibility regarding loyalty to the flock. He acknowledged his duty to account for every sheep entrusted to his care. (Bible echo - John 17:6, 12) He would leave the 99 secure sheep to go in search of the one that had strayed.

The village where he lived shared his concern for the lost sheep and would watch for his return. When they saw him striding home with the lost sheep across his shoulders, they would shout with joy and with thanksgiving.

With Jesus in the position of the true Shepherd, we see an echo from Isaiah:

“All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.” Isaiah 53:6

The Pharisees saw themselves as the descendants of Abraham, “the friend of God.” (Isaiah 41:8) But they were not. Abraham was a shepherd. (Gen. 12:16; 13:2) They were certainly not shepherds in the spiritual sense and Jesus had already condemned them for not doing the deeds of Abraham. (John 8:39) They falsely saw themselves either as shepherds leading the flock, or as sheep who never strayed, 99 just persons needing no repentance. (Luke 15:7) In this part of the parable, the lost sheep was one of the ‘sinners’ who had come to hear Jesus teach. They would be encouraged by his message!

The Lost Coin - Luke 15:8-10

Now Jesus turns to the other part of his audience, the Scribes and Pharisees. They too were lost – but they were lost ‘in the house’! Jesus was seeking for them too.

The picture becomes a more intimate one. The countryside has become the house. The 100 sheep become 10 coins. The shepherd has become the poor woman. Lighting a candle, she sweeps the house and diligently searches until she finds it. Then she calls her friends and neighbors bidding them to rejoice with her because she has found what she has lost. Once again, the emphasis is directed toward the love of God and of Jesus, the importance of those who were lost, and the joy of restoration.

The Lost Sons - Luke 15:11-32

We now see another change of figures. The Scribes and Pharisees (lost in the house like the coin) are a sullen elder son resenting the return of the repentant younger son, typifying the Publicans and Sinners (lost in the countryside like the sheep).

It is true that the Publican and Sinners had turned away from God. They had deliberately become lost. But they “had come to their senses” (verse 17), and had turned to come back to the Father. (Verse 18)

The younger son was repentant. The Scribes and Pharisees (the elder son) were not repentant. Outwardly they made a show of serving God, but Christ’s words opened their hearts for all to see the loveless motives of their “service.” The detail Jesus provided in this parable laid before the Pharisees an unmistakable picture of themselves. As we look at the reaction and words of the elder son, we see them clearly reflected:

- **The Pharisees were trying to place God in their debt: “for so many years we have been serving you” (verse 29).** Their whole attitude shows that their years of obedience to the Father had been years of duty, in which they sought to place God in their debt. These were not years of loving service. The professed love of God was a mask for love of self. (Compare Luke 17:10; Romans 4:4)
- **They were egotists.** Notice the personal pronouns “I,” “me,” “my” - the elder brother’s assessment of himself.
- **They disclaimed any association with these repentant sinners.** The elder son refers to his brother as “your son,” not as “my brother.” (Verse 30)
- **They were disobedient liars.** They refused to obey the Father’s request to join the feast (verse 28), but claimed to be sinless: “I have never neglected a command of yours.” (Verse 29) Through all their years of “service” they had not developed the character of their Father! They showed hatred when he showed love! They were resentful when he was merciful.
- **They were ready to think the worst about others.** Notice that there is no mention of association by the young brother with “harlots” until the elder brother declares it.” (Verse 30)
- **They were envious of the sinners’ way of life:** “...you have never given me a kid, that I might be merry with my friends;” (verse 29). He obviously had friends not among those whom his father had invited. The Scribes and Pharisees, though publicly disdainful of the Publicans and Sinners, were inwardly longing for their way of life.

Both sons were prodigal (wasteful) but only the younger son was repentant. The real sinners were not the people gathered around Jesus, but the Pharisees.

This parable not only condemned the Pharisees, it comforted the sinners, showing that the father waited anxiously for the return of the errant son. If they would “come to themselves,” and turn to God, He would see them “from a long way off” and would welcome them. All He required of them was that journey toward Him. (Luke 15:18-23)

The Pharisees heard this story with some grimness. Would they allow the light of God's word seen clearly in the teaching of Jesus to illuminate the 'house' and 'find' them? They could not miss its meaning, nor its invitation to join the Publican and Sinners, in joining Jesus in order to share in the blessings of His Father's love. But the elder brother maintained his position. He preferred to continue in his hurt self-righteousness and, therefore, remain outside the house, and not the feast of fellowship.

Jesus saw that the appeal of His word pictures was lost upon them. He turned to His Disciples and described these men to them, to further bring out the inconsistency and hypocrisy of these religious leaders.

The Unjust Steward - Luke 16:1-18

The elder brother was the real prodigal after all, and the true waster of his father's substance. This phrase is now used in a story told by Jesus of a steward accused by his master that he had wasted his goods. (Luke 16:1) This part of the parable elaborates on the wastefulness of the elder son, describing him now as an unjust steward in the master's house. Not now a Son, but Steward. The master called upon his steward to give an account of his stewardship. In a last desperate act, the steward called his master's debtors to him and sharply reduced their debts. He did this to place them in his debt, so that when he was dismissed from his stewardship they would be willing to support him. The master did not say that the steward had done "justly," for he was an "unjust steward." But he had to admit that he acted "shrewdly." (Verse 8)

It is interesting to note what the steward did **NOT** want to do (verse 3). He did not want to "dig" or "beg".

The idea of digging is used in Luke 6:48 of digging to lay a foundation on the Rock to ensure safely when storms come! The unjust steward did not have a foundation in Christ. He trusted his own ingenuity and resourcefulness and did not trust God. Digging is also used in Luke 13:8 about a gardener wanting to dig and dung a tree to allow it to produce fruit. The unjust steward was not willing to put in any effort to that would allow God's word to produce fruit in himself, or others. He was consumed with showing the works of the flesh, not the fruit of the spirit!

The idea of asking is used in Luke 11:9-13 where a son asks his father for good gifts. The unjust steward was too proud to ask (beg) for forgiveness from his master! This was the best course of action for him (and is) when we sin. But it requires humility, and a desire to chance one's ways. The unjust steward was unwilling to do that!

What he did do was 'mark down' the debts of others. This was an example of how he 'wasted' his master's goods. The master is God, and his debtors are those who sin against him. By 'marking down' their sin, the unjust steward was keeping them from having their sins forgiven 100% by God, not just 20% or 50%, but ALL of it! How sad that in trying to do them a favour, he was actually keeping them from salvation. See Ezekiel 13:22; Jeremiah 23:16-17

To do so he had to “handle the word of God deceitfully” (2Co 4:2). He took their ‘bill’ (Greek ‘gramma’ – see 2 Tim. 3:15 where ‘scripture’ is ‘gramma’) and reduced it. He was not being honest with God’s word, and telling them their sins were not serious.

The story ended with an ironic commendation of the unjust steward. His actions appeared wise, but only from a worldly perspective. It had achieved its end – the man was taken into the ‘everlasting habitations’ of those that follow their natural instincts... the grave!

With these words the story ended, and Jesus drew its lessons for His Disciples:

- **Use of what we have now shows our true character. (Verses 10-12)** Our “stewardship” in material things is very limited. On the other hand, immortality, once given, is “your own” forever. Jesus’ point was a simple one. If disciples are not faithful in the discharge of a temporary stewardship, how could they qualify to receive a permanent one?
- **Divided service is impossible. (Verse 13)** A slave belonged absolutely to his master. The word “serve” used by Jesus means “to be a slave.” No man can serve as a slave to both God and mammon. Slavery was all demanding, and the demands of God and mammon are mutually exclusive.

At this point, the Pharisees, who were “lovers of money” could stand it no longer. They broke into the Master’s discourse and scoffed at Him. (Verse 14) Instantly, He accepted the challenge, showing them that the unjust steward portrayed their own dishonesty exactly:

- **The Pharisees justified themselves before men. (Verse 15)** It was not God they served but men, whose favor they sought.
- **They were already “dismissed.”** They would no longer be stewards. (vs. 16). No matter how they might try to retain their power and prestige, it was useless. John’s coming had signaled the end of the era of the Law, within the context of which they sought to retain their power. Now people were crowding in to listen to earth’s coming King.
- **Their “discounting” of God’s Law would not be accepted anyway. (Verses 17,18)** Jesus finally gave a specific illustration of the work of these “unjust stewards.” As an example, their treatment of Moses’ regulation of divorce gave the people license to divorce at the slightest whim. This was an attempt to involve the people in their own blind failings, so that, being themselves corrupted, the people could hardly ask for removal of stewards who were just as corrupt as themselves. The Pharisees discounted God’s laws in the same way the unjust steward discounted the debts. Although the master acknowledged the worldly shrewdness of his steward in obtaining the support and favor of others, he was still going to be dismissed from his position.

Jesus had called the Pharisees, “uncaring shepherds,” “careless householders,” “prodigal sons” and “unjust stewards” - but more was to come.

Rich Man and Lazarus - Luke 16:19-31

The Scribes and Pharisees had forgotten that they were God’s stewards. They saw themselves as the rich man himself, instead of being his stewards. They hoarded the Law and the Prophets to themselves. So, Christ presents them as a rich man who, thoroughly deceived, spends “his” riches on himself and does not remember whose they are until it is too late.

A “leper being licked by dogs” (for the word “sores” in verse 20 is the wound of leprosy), was the Pharisees’ view of Christ surrounded by Publicans and Sinners. (Luke 15:1, 2) Publicans were tax-gatherers for Rome, no better in the Pharisees’ opinion than Gentiles, whom Jews referred to as “dogs.” (Mark 7:27) Christ being regarded by the Pharisees as a leper provides an echo from the Prophet Isaiah:

“Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.” Isaiah 53:4

One way of seeing this section is to understand that Jesus is using the Pharisees belief in the afterlife to present a story that will condemn them and their false ideas. Jesus tells of the dead speaking in this part of the parable. His words are an ironic thrust at the terrifying scary tales with which the Pharisees described the pains of “hell,” compared with the joys of “heaven.” They used these in maintaining influence over the people.

Jesus obviously did not support their views, as shown in the record of His activity in raising the real Lazarus from the dead. If He did, He would not have wept at Lazarus’ death, nor would His comfort of Lazarus’ relatives be considered in terms of hope in the resurrection. (John 11:23-26) Nor would Lazarus have been pleased in being called back from such bliss.

But the Pharisees taught these things, which they had absorbed from Greek Culture. Josephus, a Pharisee of the next generation, provides a very detailed and vivid description of their view of Hades. It bears a strong relationship to the Greek mythological view regarding the afterlife and parallels phrases and the picture presented by Christ in this parable.

So, Christ portrays their dismay, when, personified as the dead rich man, they gaze across from Hades to see Lazarus, not only in Abraham’s company, but in his bosom. He was Abraham’s special friend. (Compare John 13:25)

Nowhere does the Scripture present a literal picture of a heaven and a hell from which the occupants of each can view and talk to each other, let alone send someone from heaven to hell with a drop of water to cool the tongue of a sinner burning and suffering in intense fire.

To further support the fact that this is a parable, we have Jesus' own words that "...no one has ascended into heaven..." (John 3:13). As a further demonstration of this, we have the words of the writer to the letter to the Hebrews, providing a list of faithful people throughout history who had died in faith. Abraham was included in that list. It was stated of these people, years after Christ's resurrection and ascension, that:

"And all these having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, Because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they should not be made perfect." Hebrews 11:39, 40

Coming back to the parable, we see that the rich man pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus back to his surviving relatives:

"...But if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!" Luke 16:30

But Abraham, "a faithful rich man," refuses:

"If they did not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead" Luke 16:31

This was a crushing statement to the sneering Pharisees and a foreshadow of condemnation to them. For Christ did raise a real Lazarus from the dead, and the Scribes and the Pharisees did not repent. Nor did they, in general, repent when He Himself was raised from the dead. They not only, in their minds, "needed no repentance" (Luke 15:7), they would not even be convinced of their need by a resurrection of the dead.

But the Publicans and Sinners pressing around Jesus to hear Him, had obviously been convinced of their need and thus were in the way of salvation. Not only so, but, as "dogs," the Publican and Sinners in pressing around the Master to hear Him speak, were helping Him endure the trial that His role as Saviour brought upon Him.

As with all parables that Jesus told, there are many layers of lessons and understanding. Not only was Jesus refuting the false ideas and teachings of the Pharisees, he was giving an insight into what actually happens after death. Scripture is clear that death is like a sleep, unconsciousness (Ecc. 9:5,10; 1Co 15:51) and that the only hope for life after death is by resurrection (1 Cor. 15:12-18; 1 Thes.4:13-18). At that time the responsible are to appear at the judgement seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10) and will be separated into two classes – sheep and goats (Matt. 25:31-46). The rejected ones (like the Rich Man of this parable) will weep and gnash their teeth and be filled with regret – but their fate is irreversible (Matt. 13:41-42). Those accepted (like Lazarus in the parable) will be with Abraham, in the Kingdom and live forever (Lu 13:28; Matt. 25:21).

The key is that life is the time to serve the Lord. Once we die our fate is sealed. And we can only serve properly if we "hear Moses and the prophets"!

Upon reflection, it would be better and more appropriate to call the Parable of Luke 15 and 16 “The Parable of the Found” – the found sheep, the found coin, the found son, and Lazarus. Sadly, the Unjust Steward and the Rich Man, remained lost,.

LESSONS FOR US

In these human stories, Jesus brought out the wonderful truth that, while the Pharisees were murmuring on earth, and keeping their distance from these men who had come to Jesus, the Father Himself and the Holy Angels were rejoicing that those who had been lost were now found. Moreover, the further lesson emerges, that the position of the sinner who comes to the Father is far happier than the position of those who cling to ceremonial self-righteousness. These so-called religious leaders, bound up in traditions and conventions, coupled with their own human reasoning and Greek philosophy, did not come to Jesus in repentance. There is more joy in heaven for a repentant sinner than for these self-righteous men who could not recognize the fact that they were sinners.

“I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.” Luke 5:32

