

The Self Revelation Of Jesus In The Parables

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3-1 Elements Of Unreality

There were times when the Lord used shock tactics to get His message over. He did and said things which purposefully turned accepted wisdom and understanding on its head. Thus He touched the leper, spoke of drinking His blood...and used leaven, the usual symbol for sin, as a symbol of the quiet influence of His Gospel. And His parables feature the same element. Because the parables are so familiar to us, we can overlook the fact that their true character is intended to be shocking and disturbing- they are most definitely not just comfortable, cosy, moralistic tales. Consider the way He chooses to take a lesson from a crook who fiddles the books. The 'hero' of the story was a bad guy, not a good guy. Yet the point of the story was that we must realize how critical is our situation before God, and do literally anything in order to forgive others. We can't let things drift- disaster is at the door unless we forgive others *right now*. Everything is at stake in our lives unless we forgive others. The parables

didn't give simple teaching to those who first heard them. He used that form of teaching so that men would *not* understand Him; and even His disciples had to come to Him in order to receive the interpretations. Although they have the appearance of simple stories, their essential meaning is only granted to the reflective and spiritually minded reader. Close analysis of the parables reveal that they often contain something in them that is arrestingly unreal; and in this is very often the crux of the message. Surface level reading and listening give the impression that they are simple, homely stories, obvious in their meaning. But they are not; otherwise all men would have understood them, and the Lord would not have spoken them *so that* Israel would hear but not perceive. The true meaning depends upon perceiving that there is an element of startling unreality within the story line, that flags attention to the real message. The parables therefore challenge our stereotypes and force us to re-examine cherished suppositions. The reflections upon actual parables later in this study are a few of many possible examples.

Perhaps the most obvious signpost to this feature of elements of unreality in the parables is in that of the lost sheep: "What man of you..." would leave ninety and nine sheep in the wilderness and go searching for the one lost one? Answer: none of you would do that. And perhaps likewise, "What woman..." having lost just one piece of silver would be so obsessive about finding it, and so ecstatic with joy upon finding it (Lk. 15:4,8)? Perhaps the answer is also meant to be: "Not one of you". Yet this is the Father's passion for saving the lost, and rejoicing over them.

The parables reveal how the Lord was so sensitive to us. He realized that his audience thought in pictures; and so He turned concepts and ideas into imaginable pictures in a truly masterful way. He wanted to radically change people; and He realized that the way to do this was not by a catechism, not by pages or hours of intellectual, abstract droning, but by helping them to relate real, imaginable life to the things of His Kingdom. Truly did W.H. Auden reflect: " You cannot tell people what to do, you can only tell them parables; and that is what art really is, particular stories of particular people and experiences"(1). The way the Lord Jesus constructed and taught His parables was indeed an art form, of exquisite beauty. He took ordinary, homely stories and introduced into them the elements of unreality which we will explore in this study. By being so normal, He created the possibility of participation in the minds of His hearers; because they could relate to the very normalcy of the stories. And so when the unreal elements are perceived- e.g. the mustard seed becomes not just a bush but a huge tree- there is an element of surprise and joy. Out of, and indeed right within, the most ordinary things of life, there await for the believer the surprise and joy of 'the Gospel of the Kingdom' intersecting with their ordinary lives.

The Lonely Rich Man

The rich fool reasoned that because he had had a big harvest, he would build bigger barns and relax, because he had enough to last him "many years" (Lk. 12:18,19). The unreal element here is that a harvest doesn't last many years, especially in a Middle Eastern climate with no way of effectively preserving it. And the lesson, on reflection, is obvious. Riches don't last for ever, he who earns big wages puts them into a bag with holes in... and yet there is the genuine conviction that they will last much longer than they do. Another unreal element here is that the rich man is described as speaking *with himself*. It's hard for some cultures to appreciate how Middle Eastern culture is a collective affair. Decisions are taken through much discussion with other people. Likewise, the rich man plans out how to enjoy his wealth *alone*. There is no speech to his family; he invites *himself* to rejoice with *himself*. But all

these unreal elements about this man signpost to us the loneliness, insulation and selfishness which is brought about by excess wealth and the increase of investments. It's so relevant to the 21st century. By the way, there's a word play going on here. The man whose land brings forth many things (*eu-phoreo*) and therefore wants to be merry (*eu-phraino*) is actually a fool- *aphron*- an *a-phron* person, a person without those things. All those things were "required" of him, as a loan is required. They weren't really his. And as so often, the parable is left hanging, with no actual response from the man. We have to imagine where the man's mind turned, what he thought... and take the lesson.

Servants And Masters

The relationship between servants and master in the parables is also at times somewhat unreal. It's hard for us to imagine how slaves belonged to their masters and had to do their will and not their own. Yet in the parable of Lk. 13:7,8, the servant is commanded by his master to cut down the fig tree. Not only does the servant take a lot of initiative in saying that no, he will dig around it and try desperately to get it to give fruit; but, he says, if even that fails, then *you*, the Master, will have to cut it down... when he, the servant, had been ordered to do it by his master! This servant [the Lord Jesus] obviously has a most unusual relationship with the Master. He suggests things on his own initiative, and even passes the job of cutting off Israel back to God, as if He would rather not do it. And it's in a way the same with us. In the parable of Lk. 14:22, the servant reports to the master that the invited guests wouldn't come to the supper [cp. God's Kingdom]. The master tells the slave to go out into the streets and invite the poor. And then we're hit with an incredible unreality, especially to 1st century ears: "The servant said, Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room". No slave would take it upon himself to draw up the invitation list, or take the initiative to invite poor beggars into his master's supper. But *this* servant *did!* He not only had the unusual relationship with his master that allowed this huge exercise of his own initiative- but he somehow knew his master *so* well that he guessed in advance what the master would say, and he went and did it without being asked. In all this we have a wonderful insight into the relationship possible between us and our Lord, especially in the area of preaching / inviting people to His supper. The initiative is in our hands, and as we come to know Him better, we come to know His mind, and to sense how He would react. We have His aims and desires as ours, and we are in harmony with Him without having to be told things in so many words. And of course for a master to serve his servants was unheard of (Lk. 12:35-38). But this of course was the wonder of what the Lord did for us, "as one who serves" (Lk. 22:27), defining for us our attitude to each other at the memorial table and in all aspects of our lives and relationships. Likewise the master makes the servants "recline at table" (Lk. 12:35-38); they are made to feel like the Master, by the Master Himself! This is what it means to be "in Christ". There's a kind of out of scale inappropriacy about the idea that if the Master comes and finds the servants awake, then He will gird Himself and serve them. Of course they ought to be awake! But it's as if He is so especially impressed by this fact. And we who live awaiting His return need to take note. And the idea of the master serving is of course the idea behind the description of the cross in Phil. 2:6,7. We should have the same awkward sense of wonder at the cross as we have when we recline at the breaking of bread. This implies that those who serve the emblems are in fact manifesting the Lord Jesus, and are actually of far greater significance than the president or the speaker.

The Successful Widow

First century Palestinian peasant courts have been described in some detail (2). They involved a mass of men shouting at the judge, who usually decided cases according to who gave the largest bribe. Women never went to court. It was a man's world there. This woman had no male in her extended family to speak for her. She had no money to pay a bribe. But still she went to court and sought to persuade the judge. In this element of unreality we see the bravery of prayer, the height of the challenge; that we who have nothing and no human chance of being heard, will indeed be heard. It would've struck the initial peasant hearers of the story as strange that above all the male shouting, somehow this heroic woman was heard- and was heard repeatedly. Again, we see an encouragement to prayer. And to liken powerful praying to a woman was in itself unusual in that male dominated age. The Lord did the same thing when He spoke of how the tax collector stood far off from the other worshippers in the temple and beat on his breast. Usually men prayed with hands crossed over their chest. But men even at funerals don't usually beat upon their breast: "The remarkable feature of this particular gesture is the fact that it is characteristic of women, not men" (3). The man was quite exceptionally upset and in grief- because of his sins. And personal recognition of private sin wasn't a big feature of first century life. The Lord's initial audience would've been amazed at the contrition and grief which this man had because of his secret sins; and this is the lesson for us. The times of prayer in the temple coincided with the offering of the daily sacrifices. The man asks for God to 'have mercy on me' (Lk. 18:13). But he uses a different word to that in Lk. 18:38, where the same translation commonly occurs. *Hilastheti moi*, he says; and the noun occurs only in Rom. 3:25; Heb. 9:5; 1 Jn. 2:2; 4:10 to describe the atonement sacrifice. It seems the man was so extraordinarily moved by his own sin and the sacrifice offered. No wonder the same phrase occurs in Lk. 23:48 about people likewise beating their breasts in repentance when they saw the actual sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

The Poor Neighbour

The parable of the friend at midnight uses an element of unreality, but in a reverse way. The Lord paints the picture of a guest coming to a person who has no bread, and so they go and disturb their neighbour at midnight, asking for bread (Lk. 11:5-8). The Middle Eastern peasant who appreciated the huge burden of responsibility to give food to a visitor would say that no, he couldn't possibly imagine that the person who was asked for food would say 'No'. He would not only give bread, but whatever was needed. And so it is with God. It's unthinkable, as unthinkable as it is in a Palestinian village to not be hospitable, that our Father will not answer a prayer for resources with which to help others. This has been my own experience time and again. And further, the villager would respond not just because it is his neighbour asking him, but because he realizes that the responsibility to entertain the needy person actually falls upon the whole community. And God too sees our requests for others as partly His personal and communal responsibility. However let it be noted that the poor neighbour asks only for bread- for the very bare minimum with which to provide for the need of another. And the richer neighbour responds with far more. Again, a pattern for our own prayers for resources with which to help others. The poor neighbour asks with "importunity" (Lk. 11:8)- with shamelessness. He is confident of being heard and has no shame or hesitation to his request because he knows he really does have nothing to give the visitor. This is of course the prerequisite for prayer which will be heard. The Lord drives the point home that whoever asks in this way, receives. And yet the Lord addresses this comment to those who although "evil", knew how to give gifts to their kids. Surely the Lord was speaking to the Pharisees present, who prayed regularly. Perhaps He is saying that they had never really prayed the prayer of earnest desire, motivated by others' needs.

Omitted Details

In addition to the elements of unreality in the parables, there are other features which shout out for our attention. Often details are omitted which we would expect to see merely as part of the story. For example, the parable of the ten girls says nothing at all about the bride; the bridegroom alone is focused upon, along with the bridesmaids. Where's the bride in the story? Surely the point is that in the story, the bridesmaids are treated as the bride; this is the wonder of the whole thing, that we as mere bridesmaids are in fact the bride herself. Another example would be the way in which the sower's presence is not really explained. No reference is made to the importance of rain or ploughing in making the seed grow. The preacher is unimportant; we are mere voices, as was John the Baptist. But it is the type of ground we are which is so all important; and the type of ground refers to the type of heart we have (Mt. 13:19). The state of the human heart is what is so crucial. Yet another example is in the way that there is no explanation for exactly why the tenants of the vineyard so hate the owner and kill His Son. This teaches of the irrational hatred the Jews had towards the Father and Son. And why would the owner send His Son, when so clearly the other servants had been abused? Why not just use force against them? Here again we see reflected the inevitable grace of the Father in sending the Son to be the Saviour of the Jewish world.

Notes

(1) Quoted in M.K. Spears, *The Poetry of W.H Auden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963) p. 13.

(2) H.B. Tristram, *Eastern Customs In Bible Lands* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1894) p. 228.

(3) Kenneth Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) p. 153.

3-2 End Stress

Another feature we need to bear in mind is the almost constant stress on the end of the story as the part which makes the main point which the Lord is seeking to get over. Likewise the emphasis is often upon the last person mentioned in the story, the last action, the last words (1). Think of the parable of the prodigal; or how the Samaritan, the last man on the scene, is the example for us. "Go and do likewise" (Lk. 10:37) invites us to go forth and be like the Lord Jesus in bringing salvation to others. Or the man who buried his talent and did nothing with it; the crux of the story is that indifference to our potential is *so* awful. The parable of the sower focuses in the end on the good seed which brings a great harvest. The fact so much of the seed is lost is in itself an element of unreality- but the focus is on the fact that some seed brings forth wonderfully. And isn't this just the encouragement every preacher needs? That despite all the hard hearts, the initial responses that come to nothing, all is worth it because *someone* responds truly.

The prodigal son parable has as its end stress the problem of the self-righteous elder son. This is in fact the crux of the whole story. He refuses the invitation from his father to come in to the feast- an image used elsewhere in the parables to describe rejection of God's invitation. To refuse such an invitation was a public insult and rejection of his Father. He refuses to address his father as "Father" and refuses to call his brother "brother" [cp. "thy son"]. By

breaking his relationship with his brother, he broke his relationship with his Father. As we do likewise. And the end stress of the whole wonderful parable is that we are left wondering how the story finished. The elder brother is left standing there, temporarily rejecting his father, wondering... whether to storm off into the evening darkness, or to turn back and go in to the feast and accept his brother. And this is really the essential point of the story, and the appeal which it makes to us. We may just mindlessly forget some disfellowship case of years ago, leave the decision to others, forget in our own minds that there is a brother or sister begging for our renewed fellowship and forgiveness. Yet it is exactly these issues and our response to them which may decide our eternal destinies. And this was the end stress of the parable...

All these appear to be reasons why we shouldn't seek to over-interpret every element of a parable- although such approaches often yield very fruitful lessons. Indeed, here is the difference between parables and allegories- an allegory requires every symbol to be interpreted, but parables aren't like this. It's a different genre. The focus is often on the end stress, not the details of the parable itself. And so I submit that rather do we need to seek to perceive the main issues which the Lord is seeking to get over to us, through these special features of His stories. Indeed, when the Lord *does* give interpretations of His parables, He doesn't give interpretations of every feature which formed the furniture of the parable. When He gives quite a detailed interpretation of the parable of the wheat and tares, He doesn't comment on the significance of the servants sleeping, the barn, the *bundling* of the weeds, etc.

Notes

(1) This so-called 'end stress' in the parables is discussed well in A.M. Hunter, *The Parables Then And Now* (London: Westminster, 1971), p. 12.

3-3 The Sower Parable

The sower parable has 75% of the seed sowed on bad ground, due to the almost fanatic way the sower throws the seed so far and wide, evidently without too much attention to whether it lands on responsive soil or not. His emphasis was clearly on broadcasting the seed far and wide, rather than sowing like any normal sower would do. This taught that even if some preaching work appears not to bear fruit, this shouldn't discourage us from the essentially outgoing spirit we should have in spreading the word far and wide. To reach "all men" must be our brief; all types of men and women, including those who are obviously going to respond poorly (1). Yet the parable talks of one grain of corn that yields one hundredfold (Mk. 4:8). Any farmer would pick up on this impossibility. An average yield in 1st century Palestine was about ten fold (2). What kind of response was *this*? What kind of grain of corn? Clearly, the Lord Jesus- who described Himself in John's record as the grain of corn that was to fall into the ground and bring forth much fruit. But the other grains of corn yielded 30 and 60 fold. This was quite amazing response too, totally unheard of in practice. Was it not that the Lord was trying to show us just how radically His Gospel can transform human life? Amazing fertility was a feature of the future Messianic Kingdom (Amos 9:13; Jer. 31:27; Ez. 36:29,30)- it's as if the Lord is saying in the sower parable that the abundance of the future Kingdom can begin in human life now.

In another parable, the mustard seed becomes a tree so big that all the birds of the air can live in it (Mk. 4:32). But mustard trees aren't *this* big. Surely the point is that the small seed of the Gospel produces a quite out of proportion result- by reading literature, spotting a press advertisement, getting baptized...we will by grace become part of the Kingdom of God, and provide shelter to the nations of this world. This is the extraordinary power of the Gospel. This is how far it will take us, and the extent to which we can, through the Gospel, become saviours of men. The Gospel which we preach is likened to yeast- in itself a startling comparison- because it is through our humanity that we will influence others, by being our real, human selves. Yet the woman mixing yeast is preparing a huge amount of bread, according to the specifications in Mt. 13:33. This is perhaps to show us that whilst our influence may be quiet and unseen, the quietest witness can have a huge influence.

The parable of the wheat and weeds features another unlikely happening. Someone sows weed seeds on top of the wheat seeds. The farm workers who were sleeping aren't upbraided as we might expect. The weeds can't be uprooted because the roots are intertwined; and anyone walking into the field to remove them would trample the wheat. So how, therefore, can they be rooted up at the time of the harvest? It can only be by some super-human reapers- i.e. the Angels. It is totally and utterly beyond *us* to do the uprooting. And yet this obvious meaning has still not been perceived by many of us.

There is a fine point of translation in Lk. 8:8 which needs to be appreciated: "As he said these things, he cried, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear" (ASV and Greek). It seems that the Lord was 'throwing out' this challenge several times, as He spoke the parable. As the sower sows seed, so the Lord was challenging His hearers to decide what type of ground they were, as they heard the parable.

Notes

(1) In fairness, this parable can be read another way. In Palestine, sowing precedes ploughing. The sower sows on the path which the villagers have beaten over the stubble, since he intends to plough up the path with the rest of the field. He sows amongst thorns because they too will be ploughed in. And it has been suggested that the rocky ground was land with underlying limestone which barely shows above the surface.

(2) This has been carefully worked out by R.K. McIver 'One Hundred-Fold Yield', *New Testament Studies* Vol. 40 (1994) pp. 606-608.

3-4 The 11th Hour Worker

The servant goes at the 11th hour and hires the men who others had refused, presumably because they didn't look strong enough for the work. And they get paid the very same wage as those who had worked all day. This element of unreality serves to highlight the (humanly) irrational zeal of the Lord for the spread of the Gospel in the last days before His return. He will take on anyone who is willing to work, no matter how feebly, no matter for how short a time; the fact they are standing there ready and willing to do their little bit is what is

important to Him. A man does not usually go out between 4 and 5 p.m. looking for more labourers, with sunset approaching. He must have had an unusually great need for workers, racing against time to get the harvest in. And this is the very urgency of the Gospel, and the passion of the Lord's desire to get the harvest reaped. God could reap the harvest of the earth, requiring not help from man. But He has chosen to work through men in the preaching of the Gospel, and therefore the number of workers and their zeal reflects the amount of harvest of souls that can be reaped. The eternal destiny of others is therefore seen to depend on our extent of labour in preaching. It's also apparent that the amount of harvest was unreally huge- hence the unusual running backwards and forwards to get more workers. One expects the manager to know the size of the harvest and hire the right number of labourers at the start of the day. But in this parable, he doesn't. The awesome size of the potential harvest out there in this world means that *never* should we conclude that 'nobody's interested'. There is a *huge* harvest out there. And in passing, it can be noted that grapes have to be harvested at just the right time. If they're left even a day too long on the vine, the sugar content becomes too high and they are no use. We can perhaps infer that the parable describes a scene on a Friday, with the Sabbath coming on when nobody can work- and yet it is *just* the right day for reaping the harvest. This makes the obvious connection in our minds- that just before the Sabbath day of the Millennium, in the last days, there is an abnormally huge harvest to be reaped. And this would connect with other Biblical teaching about a great appeal being made to all nations, just prior to the Lord's return.

The parable also yields the lesson that those men would not normally work for one hour. We are to imagine those men with families at home who needed feeding. No pay that day, no food. But they were willing to do at least something. And their generous Lord simply pitied their poverty, so he gave them a day's wage- even to the 11th hour workers. And this is the Lord who has graciously hired us. Likewise, no rich King who finds that the wedding of his son will be poorly attended would go out and invite beggars. The element of unreality is that he so wants every place filled. No human King, nor his son, would want riff raff at the wedding, just because his own class of people turned down the invitations. But the King of Heaven is unlike any human king. He wants others to share in the joy of His Son, and absolutely nobody is too low to share; and moreover, He has a compelling desire to fill those places. The implication is that the net is being spread wider and more compulsively as the days shorten unto the supper.

No employer really pays all workers the same amount as the 11th hour worker; no creditor would really cancel debts simply because the debtors can't afford to pay, and take nothing at all from them; no father would really give preferential treatment to a wayward son over a son who had never disobeyed him. But the point is, God acts in the very opposite way to how we do or would do. His grace to sinners makes no human sense. And He asks us through these parables of His Son to walk out against the wind and follow His example in our treatment of sinners. Our own natural sense cries out that he who works most should have the most pay; but the unreality of the parable teaches us that this principle is set aside in the way God deals with us. *Any* gift from the Father and Son is by grace alone. The elements of unreality in the parables often bring out the extent of God's grace. The fruit farmer [=God] asked His worker [= the Lord Jesus] to cut down a barren fig tree. But this worker had such fondness for the tree, he was so unusually concerned for it, that he pleaded that it be given some more time. This reflected the Lord's love for Israel, a love beyond all reason. Likewise, which wealthy person would ever arrange a banquet and invite the very dregs of society to it? Here is the Father's amazing grace. Sometimes we have to fill in the details [another feature of the Lord's amazing stories] in order to perceive this grace. The younger son, for example,

demanded his share of the inheritance; and thus he lost his name, forfeited any claim to family membership, and openly showed that he did not wish to be part of his father's family. And yet he was received back with such grace and longing by the Father.

3-5 The Two Carpenters

The Lord foresaw the problems we would have within our community; from the schisms of the first century to the struggles of latter day believers. Consider the story He told of the carpenter with a beam in his own eye who is so keen to extract the splinter from the eye of his fellow worker (note how he almost forces himself upon his brother to do this!). There is something grotesque, absurd, over the top in this story. In this story of the two carpenters there is something not only unreal, but almost cartoon-like. We read it and think 'The Lord's obviously exaggerating, nobody would really be so foolish'. But that's exactly how He knew we would think! Our attempts to sort out our brother really are that absurd! Christ is effectively saying: 'Now, I know you'll think I'm exaggerating- but I'm not' (Lk. 6:41,42). Often it seems the Lord intends us to think His parables through to their end, imagining the necessary details. A splinter will come out of the eye naturally, it's presence will provoke tears which ultimately will wash it out. 'The grief of life will work on your brother to solve his problem, there are some spiritual weaknesses which time and the experience of life will heal; but I know you people will want to rush in and speed up the spiritual growth of your brother. But you can't do it!'. Christ even foresaw how we will stress the fact that our fellow believer is our "brother" as we try to do this; as if we'll try to be so righteous in the very moment when in God's eyes we do something grotesquely foolish. Doubtless the Lord's carpenter years were the time when He formulated this story of the two carpenters. Significantly they both had wood in their eye- as if a brother will tend to seek to correct another brother who has in essence the same weaknesses, but the 'helping' brother considers that the other brother's is so much greater than his. Perhaps the Lord intends us to take it further, and pick up the implication that these two carpenters couldn't help each other; but there's another one who can...

The story of the indebted steward likewise stresses the importance of true forgiveness. The master commends the steward because he had told others that their debts to his master were reduced. No *human* master would ever commend his steward for acting so irresponsibly (Lk. 16:8). But the Lord Jesus does commend us for forgiving those who sin against Him, even though our forgiving of those indebted to us and Him is against all the laws of human common sense. In another parable, the wicked servant owes 10,000 talents- one hundred million denarii (Mt. 18:23). This was a monstrous, unimaginable sum- in 4BC, the whole of Galilee and Peraea paid only 200 talents per year in taxes, one fiftieth of the amount. The annual income of Herod the Great is estimated at only 900 talents (New Jerome Bible Commentary). The Lord was using shock tactics to show how great is man's debt to God...and to throw into strong relief the sharp contrast with the way the fellow servant has such a trivial debt. The story is plain. The sins we perceive others have committed against us should be as nothing compared to the huge debt we feel personally before God. This explains why the acceptable man prays with his hands on his breast- when every Palestinian Jew would have expected a story about a man praying to feature him with uplifted hands, as was the custom. The unusual element to the story brought out the extent of the man's contrition. Indeed, the total acquittal of the indebted man, with no further penalty at all, would have caught the early hearers by surprise. The man, they imagined, would have walked off surprised by joy, ecstatic, thankful, relieved. And yet he goes and does something totally unexpected and illogical- he grabs another man and demands he pay up his debts. The

unexpected twist of the story of course brings out the madness of any unforgiveness on our part, and the awful nature of human ingratitude for forgiveness- just as in the two carpenters parable.

The need for peace amongst ourselves as a community is brought out in the parable of the salt that lost its saltiness. Straight away, we're faced with a paradox- for true salt can't lose its saltiness, seeing that sodium chloride is a stable compound, free of impurities. Salt was a symbol in the Lord's teaching for having peace with one another. If we don't have this, we're not salt. If we're not any influence upon others, we're not salt. It's as simple as that.

3-6 The Fanatic Shepherd

At the time of Jesus, it was taught (*Mishnah Qidd* 4.14) that "A man should not teach his son to be a herdsman...for their craft is the craft of robbers". Shepherds weren't seen as kindly old men. They were seen as crafty and thieves. But the Lord chose that figure to represent Himself and the Father- even though the Old Testament likens God to the shepherd of Israel. The startling, unsettling figure [for the first century Jewish mind] was to demonstrate how it is the Lord's humanity that makes Him our saviour. Likewise, the likening of the Gospel to yeast would have been shocking; or to a mustard bush, which is a member of the cabbage family [rather, e.g., than to a fruitful vine or upright palm tree]. It is signaled to us that there is to be a strangeness to this new Kingdom about which Jesus spoke, a humanity and yet unusualness about it. It was hard for the Lord to explain to us the level of love for us which He would reach in the cross. So He told a story of a shepherd who so madly loves his sheep, whose life is so taken up by his job, that he would die to save one of them, and comes back triumphantly rejoicing when he has found the lost sheep (Lk. 15:5). The average shepherd would have surely accepted that some sheep are lost, it's the luck of the game. But this shepherd who dropped all and ran off after one lost sheep was no usual shepherd. And the element of unreality in the story brings out the Lord's grace towards us. Note in passing how the man : sheep relationship portrays that between us and Christ. As the sheep understood pathetically little about the shepherd's sacrifice to save it, so we too fail to appreciate the height of the fact that Christ died for us, as the shepherd for the sheep. We can be sure that the frightened sheep didn't bob along on the shepherd's shoulders, grinning all the way home. With his underside covered in faeces and mud, it would have struggled with the Saviour shepherd, fanatic almost in his passion to save the sheep. As he stumbled along the rocky paths, shoulders bowed down, hands against his chest clutching the animal's paws, the shepherd would be the living imitation of the posture of the Lord as He carried the cross of our sins to Calvary. All this is a pattern of the almost fanatic effort we should expend to win back the lost.

And of course the element of unreality is seen in the way the shepherd takes the sheep *home* and not back to the fold, inviting neighbours around to rejoice that his sheep had been found. The quite unusual joy and humanly inappropriate love of the shepherd for that sheep is of course there to signpost to us the "love beyond all reason" of the true shepherd for us. The way the lost sheep is brought home rather than returned to the fold was also perhaps some sort of allusion to the teaching of Dt. 22:1 that the lost sheep of your brother's must be returned to *him*. This would mean that our pastoral care should not simply be for our 'own' sheep, those for whom we have responsibility; but for the lost sheep of other 'pastors' who've not done their job.

Jn. 10:12 implies that Christ, the good and fanatic shepherd, saw the wolf coming. He didn't flee, but fought with this ferocious beast until the death. He says that if He had not done this, the sheep would be scattered. The struggle between Christ and the devil / flesh was therefore at its most intense on the cross, in His time of dying. The cross was not only a continuation of His struggle with the (Biblical) [devil](#). It was an especially intensified struggle; and the Lord foresaw this fight coming. There is an element of unreality in this story that serves to make two powerful points. Firstly, no normal shepherd would give his life in protecting his sheep. The near fanaticism of this shepherd is also found in Am. 8:4, which describes the Lord as taking out of the mouth of the lion the legs or piece of ear which remains of the slain sheep; such is the shepherd's desperate love for the animal that now is not. The love of Christ for us on the cross, the intensity and passion of it, is quite outside any human experience. Hence the command to copy His love is a new commandment. And secondly, wolves don't normally act in the way the story says. They will only fight like this when they are cornered, and they aren't *so* vicious. But the point the Lord is making is crucial to us: the devil, the power of sin, is far more powerful than we think, and the struggle against it on the cross was far far harder than we would think. For there He lived out the passion of the fanatic shepherd of His story.

This point about the strength of sin, and thereby the extent of the Lord's victory, is brought out by another unreal element in the Lord's picture of "a strong man fully armed [guarding] his own court" (Lk. 11:21 RV). This householder is fanatic; he wanders around fully armed to protect his own courtyard and his goods, rather than getting servants or guards to do it. The Lord being "stronger than he" through the cross was therefore indeed strong. The amazing extent and power of the Lord Jesus is further brought out in the story of the worker in the vineyard who can almost direct His boss- the Father- not to cut down the barren fig tree of Israel until it has more chance to bear spiritual fruit- "if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down" (Lk. 13:9). Speaking to crowds of day labourers and farm workers, this would have struck them as strange- that this worker had such power over his boss.

Not only is the shepherd unreal. The sheep are, too- once we perceive the link back to Ez. 34:17-22. They tread down the good pasture so others can't eat from it; having drunk clean water themselves, they make the rest of the water dirty by putting their feet in it; and the stronger sheep attack the weaker ones. This isn't how sheep usually behave! But these sheep are unusually badly behaved. And they are symbols of us, for whom this unusual shepherd gave His life.

3-7 Parables Of Israel

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is perhaps most clearly seen in His attitude to Israel. So many of the parables refer in some way to the love of God and Christ for Israel; and their love for rebellious, indifferent Israel is the supreme example of pure grace. He felt towards them as a hen for her chicks (Lk. 13:34). Here again is an element of unreality; a hen whose very own chicks won't be gathered under her wings. This seems to go right against nature; the pain of the rejected parent was there in the experience of the Lord. He wasn't just passively enduring the polemics of the Pharisees; they were His chicks, He really wanted them under His wings (cp. Israel dwelling under the wings of the cherubim). We must ever remember this when we read the records of Him arguing with them and exposing their hypocrisy. He wasn't just throwing back their questions, playing the game and winning, just surviving from day to day with them. He was trying to gather them, and their rejection of His words really hurt Him. The elder brother in the prodigal story shows an unbelievably self righteous attitude. Yet, this truly is the position of the legalists of Christ's day and this. The love of the

Father [God] for the son [repentant Israel] is quite something. Would a father really rush out and kiss him, i.e. forgive him (Lk. 15:20 cp. 2 Sam. 14:33) without first requiring an explanation and specific repentance? For this unusual Father, the mere fact the son wanted to return was enough. And when the vineyard workers refused to work and beat and killed the Owner's servants that were sent, the response we expect is that the Owner sends in some armed men and re-establishes control. But He doesn't. Why ever keep sending servants after some are killed? But this is the loving, almost desperate persistence of the Father for our response. This is what the parables of Israel teach. In the end, He does something humanly crazy. He sends a single Man walking towards them- His only Son. Or think of the parable of the older son. The loving Father divides all that He has between the two sons- and the son who remained at home therefore ended up with *all* that the Father had, seeing the younger son had blown the other half of it (Lk. 15:31). This was the extent of God's love for Pharisaic, hypocritical Israel. He gave them His all- the blood of His only Son. Elderly oriental gentlemen never run in public. But the Father will do so when the younger son returns. Such will be His joy, and such is His joy over every sinner who repents!

The Lord's initial Palestinian hearers were well used to the scenario of absentee landlords. The parables of Israel would have been easily understood by them. The landlords lived far away, were never seen, and sometimes their workers took over the whole show for themselves. The Lord's parable of the absentee landlord in Lk. 20:9-16 alludes to this situation. He sends messengers seeking fruit from the vineyard, but the tenants abuse or kill them, and he does nothing. When his son shows up, they assume that he's going to do just as before- ignore whatever they do to him. After all, they'd got away with not giving him any fruit and ignoring his messengers for so long, why would he change his attitude? He was so far away, he'd been in a "far country" for a very long time (Lk. 20:9), they didn't really know him. The Lord asked the question: "What therefore shall the lord of the vineyard do unto them?" (Lk. 20:15). The obvious answer, from the context provided within the story, would be: "Judging on past experience, not much at all". But then the Lord presented the element of unreality in the story, as a sudden, biting trick of the tail: No, the lord of the vineyard would actually personally come and destroy them, and give the vineyard to other tenants. Even though his experience of having tenants farm his land had been a fruitless and painful experience that had cost him the life of his son. And it was that element of unreality that brings home to us the whole point of the story. The Father does appear distant and unresponsive to our selfishness, our rebellion, and our refusal to hear his servants the prophets. But there is a real judgment to come, in which He will personally be involved. And yet even His destruction of the Jewish tenants hasn't taken away His almost manic desire to have workers, in His desperate desire for true spiritual fruit. The parables of Israel surely speak encouragement to each of us.

The parable of the absentee landlord has a telling twist to it. Absentee landlords who had never visited their land for ages, and found the people they sent to the property beaten up, would usually just forget it. They wouldn't bother. In the parable which draws on this, the Lord asks what the landlord will do (Lk. 20:15). The expected answer was: 'Not much. He got what he could, he was never bothered to go there for years anyway'. But *this* landlord is odd. He keeps on sending messengers when any other landlord would have given up or got mad earlier on. But God's patience through the prophets was likewise unusual. And then, when the tenants thought they must surely be able to get away with it because the Lord seemed so distant and out of touch... He suddenly comes Himself in person and destroys them. He doesn't hire a bunch of people to do it. He comes in person, as the Lord will in judgment. And instead of deciding he'd had his fingers burnt and giving up vineyards as a

bad job, this Lord gives the vineyard to others- He tries again. And so the Lord is doing with the Gentiles.

3-8 Parables Of The Call Of The Gospel

It was totally scandalous that the majority of guests refused an invitation by the King (Mt. 22:9; Lk. 14:21-23), and that whilst the dinner was cold on the table, a desperately urgent expedition was sent to get people to come in and eat it. This is the urgency of our Gospel proclamation. And no King or wealthy man would really invite riff-raff off the street into his party; yet this is the wonder of God's grace in calling us through the Gospel. And such is the tragedy of humanity's rejection of the Gospel. To reject a royal invitation was tantamount to rejecting a royal command. It was unheard of in the time of Jesus. Yet people just don't perceive the honour of being invited by the King. Notice too how it is the King Himself who makes all the arrangements- not, as the initial hearers would have expected, a senior steward or his wife. But the King Himself. And this reflects the extraordinary involvement of God Almighty in personally inviting each of us to fellowship with Him, through the call of the Gospel. Likewise that *all* the girls should fall asleep whilst awaiting the bridegroom (Mt. 25:5) is unusual- they must have been a pretty lazy, switched off bunch. And yet immediately we are led by the Lord to pass judgment upon ourselves- which is quite a feature of the parables, e.g. Mt. 21:31; Lk. 7:43 [as it is elsewhere- consider 2 Sam. 12:5; 14:8; 1 Kings 20:40). Note how there is surely an element of unreality in the Lord's description of *all* those invited to the dinner refusing the invitation (Lk. 14:18,24). Would really *nobody* respond to such a gracious invitation? This was the obvious question that He begged in the minds of His hearers. The intention being that each hearer would reflect: "Is it I...?"...maybe at least *I* could respond to the call of the Gospel...The parable of the wedding feast has an inappropriacy in that for 'merely' rejecting the invitation to the feast and beating the messengers, the King despatches an army to attack them- whilst the meal is as it were hot on the table ready to be eaten (Mt. 22:3-7). The point is that every rejection of the invitation, every mockery of the preacher, elicits an amazing anger in God.

That the King Himself invited beggars into His feast also stands out as strange...what kind of king is this? And what fortunate beggars. Immediately, we have the lesson powerfully brought home to us. And why ever would a guest refuse the wedding garment offered to him on entry to the feast (Mt. 22:11)? The element of unreality in the story makes it stand out so clearly. And yet ask people why they are not baptized, why they are refusing the righteous robes of Christ, the call of the Gospel...and it is anything from clear and obvious to them. The scandal of the parable hasn't struck them. And there's another strange element to the story. Whilst the supper is still getting cold, the King sends off a military expedition (Mt. 22:7,8), but this is incidental to his desire to get on with the feast with his guests. Surely the message is that what is all important for the Father and Son is our response to their invitation, our desire to be at that feast, our turning up there- and the punishment of the wicked is not that significant on their agenda, even though it has to be done.

Two Invitations

Most commentators make the point that Middle Eastern banquets feature two invitations. If a person responds to the first one, then animals are killed in accordance with the number of expected guests, and then at banquet time, a servant is sent to collect the guest and bring them to the feast (1). It is this *second* invitation which is rejected in the story. The people have all said 'yes' initially. The meaning is clear. Christ our lamb has been slain- and now, we are

invited to actually sit down at the banquet, to partake in the breaking of bread feast, typical as it is of the final 'supper' of God's Kingdom. "Come, for all is now ready" is a present imperative implying 'continue coming'. To refuse the second invitation is therefore unreal in its rudeness and in the sense of hurt and shock to the host. What is also unreal is that *all* the guests refuse it. What's also unreal is the evidently untrue and irrelevant nature of the excuses given. Banquets were in the afternoon / evening- which was not when work was done. Lk. 17:8 refers to the meal happening *after* the day's work has been done. One man said he had bought a field and had to go check it out. But purchase of property in the East takes a huge amount of time, every tree and wall is inspected with the utmost care before the field is bought. It would be like saying 'I just bought a house online which I've never seen in another country, tonight I have to go and see it'. Moreover, time constraints in Middle Eastern culture simply aren't what they are elsewhere. All the things people said they just *had* to do there and then could easily have been done another day. After all, they had agreed to come to a banquet. The man who claimed to have bought five yoke of oxen and had to rush to test them was likewise telling an obvious untruth. Kenneth Bailey comments on how teams of oxen are sold in Eastern villages: "The team is taken to the market place. At the edge of the market there will be a small field where prospective buyers may test the oxen... [or] the farmer owning a pair for sale announces to his friends that he has a team available and that he will be plowing with them on a given day... prospective buyers make their way to the seller's field to watch the animals working and... to drive them back and forth across the field to be assured of their strength and evenness of pull. All of this obviously takes place before the buyer even begins to negotiate a price" (2). Further, this farmer claims to have bought five yoke of oxen. This was a huge investment for a peasant farmer. He surely wouldn't buy them without testing them first, particularly given the long drawn out process of buying and negotiating prices which is part of Palestinian culture. Another point to note is that animals were all seen as rather unclean; to make an excuse for absence on the basis of animals is effectively saying that the animals are more important to the invited guest than the host. Likewise the excuse to have just married a bride holds no water- because weddings were planned well in advance, it was obvious that there would be a conflict between the banquet and the wedding. Why, therefore, accept the initial invitation?

The host's reaction as we've noted earlier is also unusual. Instead of giving up, he allows himself to be even further humiliated in the eyes of the village by inviting yet more people- the beggars, the despised ones. He had invited people from his town- but now he invites people unknown to him, and finally, people from outside his immediate area, living under hedges. This desperate appeal, with all the mocking and shame which it would've brought with it, is surely Luke's preparation for announcing to us at the end of the Gospel our duty to now go out into all the world and invite all to God's Banquet. What we can easily fail to understand is that for those beggars, there would be a huge cultural barrier to refusing the invitation. The beggar would be amazed that he as an unknown person, from out of the host's area, was being invited to this great banquet. He'd have figured that something ain't right here, that this person can't be for real. 'What have I ever done for him? What does he expect of me? I can't pay him back in any form...'. And of course, they wouldn't have received the first invitation. They were being invited to immediately go into a great banquet with no prior invitation. And in all this, in this unreality, we have the strangeness and difficulty of acceptance of pure grace. Hence the host commanded the servants to grab them by the arm and pull them in to the banquet.

"None of those men who were invited shall taste of my banquet" may seem an obvious and even redundant thing to say- until we realize the practice of sending portions of the banquet

food to those who were 'unavoidably absent' (3). They thought they could participate at a distance, not be serious about the actual feast. They thought just saying yes to the invitation and making dumb excuses was OK... that the host was so insensitive he wouldn't notice the obvious contradictions. They didn't stop to think of his pain at their rejection. But the point is, they had accepted the initial invitation, they wanted some part in all this, and the implication is that they expected to be sent their share in the banquet. Now all this becomes of biting relevance to us who have accepted the invitation to God's Kingdom. We all have a tendency to think that God somehow doesn't notice, doesn't feel, can put up with our dumb excuses for our lack of serious response. In a sense, 'All you gotta do is say yes'. I read a few sentences of T.W.Manson which just summed up my own conclusions from studying the parables, especially those in Lk. 15 which speak of the 'repentant' person as someone who is 'found' rather than does anything much: "The two essential points in [Christ's] teaching are that no man can enter the Kingdom without the invitation of God, and that no man can remain outside it but by his own deliberate choice. Man cannot save himself, but he can damn himself... Jesus sees the deepest tragedy of human life, not in the many wrong and foolish things that men do, or the many good and wise things that they fail to accomplish, but in their rejection of God's greatest gift" (4).

We're not only the invited guests, we're also symbolized by the servants. Notice how the guests address the servant as the master, and ask him directly to be excused. As we've pointed out [elsewhere](#), in our preaching of the Gospel we are the face of Christ to this world. We should be urging those who have accepted the invitation to enter in to the Master's supper, appealing to them, feeling His hurt at their rejection. To reject those who have accepted the invitation *on our initiative*, i.e. to ban this one and that one from the memorial feast because of our personal politics with them, is therefore so awful. The parable ends with the house not yet full- begging the question, will it ever fill up? Will the beggars believe in grace enough? How persuasive will the servants be? All of which questions we have to answer.

Notes

(1) The many references to this are listed in I.H.Marshall *The Gospel Of Luke* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978) p. 587.

(2) Kenneth Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) p. 97.

(3) J.D.M. Derrett, *Law In The New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1970) p. 141.

(4) T.W. Manson, *The Sayings Of Jesus* (London: S.C.M., 1937) p. 130.

3-9 The Parables Of Judgment

The day of judgment was an important theme with the Lord. There is an element of unreality in the way He speaks of the King as being the judge (Mt. 25:40); the implication is that our judgment will be an extremely important event; the King Himself is the judge (actually, the King of heaven and earth). The figure of judgment would suggest a grim faced judge, with all the dignity and soberness of the courtroom, whatever the verdict is. But there are elements of unreality in the pictures of judgment which are put before us in the parables. This judge is emotionally involved in each case (unheard of in a human court); He exalts: " Well

done...enter thou into the joy of thy Lord" (Mt. 25:23). The picture of the happy judge, breaking down in joy at the verdict, inviting the hesitant believer to share his joy in their victory. The picture seems so imaginable; "enter thou into the joy of thy Lord" suggests a reticence, an unbelief, at the outcome. Compare this with the one hour labourers receiving a day's pay (Mt. 20:9), and the faithful almost remonstrating with their Lord that they have not done the things He reminds them of (Mt. 25:38-40). But we will overcome our reticence; we *will* enter our Lord's joy; for we shall stand before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy (Jude 24). The parables of judgment express this in a wonderful way. The Master is so delighted that His servants are watching for Him that He immediately sits down and gets a meal ready for them, doing the serving Himself (Lk. 12:37). There is again an arresting element of unreality here. Would a Master really do this (cp. Lk. 17:7), at such an unlikely time at night, would he really serve himself, and would he really be so glad that the servants were waiting up for him? But these elements of unreality serve to teach the lessons: that the Lord will have unspeakable joy at His return because of our expectancy of the second coming, and He will surprise us by His glee and enthusiasm for us. And why is the bridegroom *so* strict about rejecting latecomers to the wedding (Mt. 25:12; Lk. 13:25)? Surely to show the crucial and eternal importance of immediate response to the Lord's coming. Any delay will indicate our basic lack of love for our Lord. In Him, in that day of His joy that we were ready, will be fulfilled Zeph. 3:17: "The Lord thy God in the midst of thee...He will save, He will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing. I will gather them that are sorrowful (us) for the solemn assembly", when the Lord will keep Passover with us again. Then we will live out the element of unreality in the parable of the pounds: wise use of a few coins results in eternal power over several cities. Ten cities came from the use of ten pounds (Lk. 19:17). The parables of judgment leave us to imagine the men marvelling in disbelief at the reward given to them, so out of proportion to their wisdom and faithfulness in such a short period. They expected at most just a few pounds to be given to them. But they are given nothing less than rulership in the Kingdom of God.

The Lord who will judge us knows us each individually. The question arises, 'Why would *all* the servants stay awake in order to open the door (Lk. 12:37)? Why not just the night watchman? The answer is that there is a totally unique and special personal relationship between this Master and *all* His servants.

The parable about taking the lowest seat sounds obvious to us. If a poor nobody is invited to the King's feast, he would naturally take the lowest place, with feelings of wonderment, awe, embarrassment, joy, quiet honour, excitement that he'd been invited, that he was somewhere too good for him, by grace. The element of unreality in the story is that the man arrogantly takes a high place, and has to be demoted at the coming of the King. There's something unreal about this. But there's the rub. This is exactly how we are behaving when we jockey for status and 'power' in the ecclesia [in whatever form], when we fail to consider each man better than ourselves to be. This is how absurd we're being. The Lord's parable was evidently based upon Prov. 25:6,7: "Put not forth thyself in the presence of the king, and stand not in the place of great men". The way the Lord applies this to His church implies that we should consider each of the other invited guests as "great men" of nobility. This is the level of respect which He intends there to be amongst us for our fellow brethren. The parables of judgment truly touch the very core of our spiritual being.

His many references to judgment day in the parables of judgment reveal at least two themes:

1. He puts far more emphasis on the rejected than on the accepted.

2. There is the theme of surprise in many of the parables of judgment. Both worthy and unworthy are surprised at both the process and outcome of judgment.

The day of judgment was an important theme with the Lord. There is an element of unreality in the way He speaks of the King as being the judge (Mt. 25:40); the implication is that our judgment will be an extremely important event; the King Himself is the judge (actually, the King of heaven and earth). This indicates that the Lord wishes to put before us the picture of those who have been called to the Kingdom but reject His offer. Sadly we seem to be shying away from this picture as a community, falling victim to the sloppy picture of God peddled by an apostate Christendom. This stress on rejection is only a continuation of the emphasis of the Old Testament. The real possibility of rejection at judgment day was evidently a motivator in Paul's life (e.g. 1 Cor. 9:27), and he used "the terror" of the coming day of judgment to persuade men in his teaching of the ecclesias (2 Cor. 5:11), and also in his preaching to the world (e.g. Acts 17:31). Paul's exposition of judgment to come caused Felix to tremble (Acts 24:25). I wonder whether he would if he walked into a Christian meeting today.

The parables of judgment have stress the theme of surprise at the process and outcome of the judgment. This ought to be a powerful influence on our thinking and behaviour. For all our study and preparation, that day will surprise us, it will shake us to the roots, as the newly built houses were rocked and battered to the foundations by the stormy wind and rain (representing Christ's interrogation of our conscience at judgment, Mt. 7:27). If that day is to be a surprise to us, we better have an appropriate humility now, recognizing that ultimately our perceptions of many things will be shown to be wrong. There is even the possible implication that some who will be accepted by the Lord who even at the judgment have wrong attitudes towards their brethren. Thus before the Lord of the harvest, those who thought they had worked hardest complained that those they thought had done less, were still getting a penny. They were rebuked, but they still had their penny (cp. salvation; Mt. 20:11). The subsequent comment that the first shall be last might imply that they will be in the Kingdom, but in the least place. Likewise the brother who takes the highest place in the ecclesia will be made with shame to take the lower place (Lk. 14:9). Or the bitter elder brother, angry at the Father's gracious enthusiasm for the worthless brother, is addressed by the Father (God) in language which is relevant to the Lord Jesus: "Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine" (Lk. 15:30). These sentiments are elsewhere expressed about the Lord Jesus. Is the implication that bitter elder brother is still in Christ and accepted in Him, even though his attitude to his brother is not what it should be? The least in the Kingdom will be those who break commandments *and teach men so* (Mt. 5:19); but the least in the Kingdom will be counted greater than John the Baptist was in this life (Mt. 11:11). The simple message is that there will be some in the Kingdom who simply weren't very obedient in this their day of probation. Admittedly, these details are capable of other interpretations. But bear these points in mind, especially if you ever struggle with the apparent harshness of some Christians you may meet.

Different parables of judgment give different aspects of the judgment. It may be that we can put them all together and build up a time sequence of the process of judgment. Or it may be that the judgment will be different for each of us, and the parables reflect the different cases which the Lord (even in His humanity) foresaw coming before Him at the judgment. For the rejected, the process may be like this:

Firstly, incomprehension (Mt. 25:37) and surprised anger, then realization of the Lord's verdict.

He points out their failings,

Then they give an explanation of their behaviour (Mt. 25:24), justifying themselves (Mt. 25:44).

The Lord asks a series of questions, to which there is no answer.

Then there is the speechlessness (Mt. 22:12),

Followed by an ashamed slinking away from the judgment (1 Jn. 2:28 Gk.),

A desire to escape but having no place to run (Heb. 2:3, quoting Is. 20:6 concerning the inability of men to escape from the approach of the invincible Assyrian army). The rejected will see that the Lord is coming against them with an army much stronger than theirs, and they have missed the chance to make peace (Lk. 14:31).

It surely isn't incidental that this is exactly the pattern of events which the men went through who beheld the Lord's crucifixion. It's this correspondence which makes me lean towards the idea that the descriptions of the judgment are intended to be read as chronological fragments from the rejection of those who crucify the Lord afresh.

The Figure Of Judgment

We must ever remember that judgment as we meet it in the parables of judgment is only a figure being used to describe our meeting with the Lord. It's difficult to know how far to take the figure. Thus the question arises, Does Christ know beforehand who will be accepted, and the degree of their reward? Lk. 19:15 suggests that perhaps not; the Lord calls the servants "that he might know how much every man had gained by trading". He is ordained *to be* judge of all (Acts 10:42). However, as Lord of Heaven and earth, with all power given to Him, this seems unlikely- although it must be remembered that in the same way as God is omnipotent and yet limits His omnipotence, so He may limit His omniscience. The shepherd sees the difference between sheep and goats as totally obvious. It needs no great examination. And yet the parables and the very figure of a judge weighing up evidence and coming to a conclusion seems to suggest the opposite. Surely the idea is that the judge, the omniscient Lord of all, will act at the judgment *as if* He needs to gather evidence from us and thereby reach His verdict. The parables give this impression because they surely describe how the judgment will feel to us. We demonstrate below how many of the parables imply that our acceptance at the judgment all depends on our attitude to our brother. But we know (or we ought to) that this isn't the *only* thing that our redemption hinges on; but the point of the parables is that this will be very prominent in our minds then.

So what is the purpose of the judgment, according to the parables of judgment? My sense is that it is for our benefit, not the Lord's, although an obsession with the figure of judgment may imply the opposite. In one parable, the Lord Jesus taught that *before* the actual judgment, the righteous will tell the Lord how many pounds the pound they were given has gained. In another, the Lord's picture was of the faithful *after* the judgment had been pronounced, questioning with the Lord as to whether they really had done what He had said. We get the

picture of an initial account from us, the Lord's judgment, *and then a discussion with us after the verdict has been pronounced*. This of itself indicates that we are not to see the judgment merely as a method for dividing up the rewards and sorting out the punishments. Its aim is to glorify God through our response to the realizations which we are then driven to. The faithful and all their works are foreknown. From God's perspective there seems no reason why the faithful cannot be immediately transferred to immortality at the Lord's coming. They are, after all, seen by Him as being in Christ, who has risen again and received immortality. But how little appreciation of God's grace, what small self-knowledge would we have if this were the case. A few years of what we considered suffering, scratching around on the surface of our natures, almost spoilt by the constant care of our loving Father, then death, and then the next we know we are in the eternal glory of the Kingdom. The judgment seat will surely be a vital part of our spiritual education and preparation for receiving God's nature (1). Immediately after it, we are told, "the Kingdom...will be likened unto ten virgins..." (Mt. 25:1 and context), the implication being that *then* we will perceive the truths contained in that parable; only then will we fully appreciate the result of watchfulness and keeping oil in the lamps. The rejected will see themselves thrust out of the Kingdom (Lk. 13:28); as if somehow they see themselves from outside of themselves. What spirituality they thought they had they will see as it were taken away from them (Lk. 8:18 A.V.mg.). This will be the result of the judgment process. 1 Cor. 11:32 may also be a reference to the educative effect of judgment: "When we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world". The world's condemnation will be at the second coming; the judgment and chastening to which Paul refers must therefore be that of the last day. However, in the context He is making the point that our self-examination at the memorial meeting and our response to the chastening hand of God in our present life is in fact a foretaste of that final judgment experience.

Then we will realize our sinfulness, then we will behold the greatness of God's grace and the supremacy of Christ's victory. Then we will realize how small our understanding was, how little of God we knew, and how great is the reward we are being given, how out of proportion it is to our present experience and responsibilities. We almost get the feeling that the servants thought they had done well when they presented the pounds they had gained as a result of how they had used the pound given them. The pound (mina) given was equivalent to at most \$1000 (2005). Yet the reward was way out of proportion, both to what had been given, and to what they had achieved with it: ten cities! The Master's words almost seem to be a gentle rebuke: "Because thou hast been faithful in a *very little*, have thou authority over ten cities" (Lk. 19:17); "thou hast been faithful over a *few things*, I will make thee ruler over many things" (Mt. 25:23). The "Truth" we have now (and it is that) is "a very little...a few things". We mustn't see it as an end in itself. Yet because of our humanity, our limited vision, the way we are locked up in our petty paradigms, we tend to think that the Kingdom will be rather similar to our present experience of "the Truth". Yet the Lord emphasizes, at least twice, that what we have now is pathetically limited compared to the infinitely greater spiritual vision of the Kingdom. We (personally) will then be made ruler over *all* that Christ has (Mt. 24:47; the "many things" of Mt. 25:23); and in him are hid *all* the riches of spiritual wisdom (Col. 2:3).

" The true riches"

Lk. 16:11, in another of the parables of judgment, hammers home the same point; if we are faithful in how we use the things lent to us by God in this life, we will be given "the true riches". What we now have is "the Truth", because this is how the Spirit speaks of it. But

Truth is relative, and the Truth God wants us to accept as Truth is doubtless designed by Him to be acceptable by mere mortals. But it isn't " the true riches" spoken of here. We are asked to be faithful in that which is God's, and then we will be given " that which is your own" (Lk. 16:12) in the Kingdom, as if we will be given " true riches" which somehow are relevant to us alone, the name given which no one knows except ourselves (Rev. 2:17). " Riches" represent the riches of wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:13), and they are paralleled with " that which is your own" , as if somehow in the Kingdom we will be given a vast depth of spiritual knowledge and perception which is in some way relevant to us alone. To me, those few words of Lk. 16:11,12 take me to the brink of understanding what the Kingdom will be about. We can go no further.

But judgment day is not only for our personal education and humbling. It is for the enlightenment of us all as a community, in that there is fair evidence that in some sense the process of judgment will be public, and all the believers will see the true characteristics of those with whom they fellowshipped in this life. Thus the unworthy will be revealed as being without a wedding garment, and the faithful will see Him (for the first time) as walking naked and in shame (Mt. 22:11; Rev. 16:15). The evil servant will be " cut asunder" (Mt. 24:51), i.e. his hypocrisy will be openly revealed for the first time (remember, he was an ecclesial elder in mortal life, according to the parable). What we have spoken in the Lord's ear will be revealed by Him openly (" from the housetops") at the judgment (Lk. 12:3).

The Goats

According to another of the parables of judgment in Lk. 19:23, the Lord will shew the unworthy how they could have entered the Kingdom. Again, notice how the judgment is for the education of those judged. He will shew them how they should have given their talent, the basic Gospel, to others, and therefore gained some interest. This has to be connected with the well known prohibition on lending money to fellow Israelites for usury; usury could only be received from Gentiles (Dt. 23:20). Surely the Lord is implying that *at the least* this person could have shared the Gospel with others, especially (in a Jewish context) the Gentile world. This would have at least brought some usury for the Lord. This would suggest that issues such as apathy in preaching, especially the unwillingness of the Jewish believers to share their hope with the Gentiles, will be raised by the Lord during the judgment process. Of course, the Lord hadn't told the servant (in the story) to lend the money to Gentiles; he was expected to use his initiative. The overall picture of the story is that *at least the man should have done something!* The Lord would even have accepted him if he lent money on usury, something which the Law condemned; if he'd have done *something*, even if it involved breaking some aspects of God's will... Instead, his attitude was that he had been given the talent of the Gospel, and he saw his duty as to just keep hold on it. He was angry that the Lord should even suggest he ought to have done anything else! We really must watch for this attitude in ourselves. He justifies himself by saying that he has " kept" the money (Lk. 19:20), using the word elsewhere used about the need to *keep* or hold on to the doctrines of the One Faith (1 Tim. 1:19; 3:9; 2 Tim. 1:13; Rev. 6:9). He had done this, he had held on, he hadn't left the faith. And he thought this was enough to bring him to the Kingdom. Sadly, our view of spirituality has almost glorified this very attitude. Any who show initiative have been seen as mavericks, as likely to go wrong. The emphasis has been on holding on to basic doctrine, marking your Bible with it, attending weekly meetings about it (even if you snooze through them), regularly attending...And, son, you won't go far wrong. The Lord, in designing this parable as He did, had exactly this sort of complacency in mind.

Finally. The Lord foretells the spiritual culture which He will show even to the rejected, when He mentions how He will call the rejected " friend" (Mt. 22:12), using the same word as He used about Judas (Mt. 26:50). Vine describes it as a word meaning " comrade, companion, a term of kindly address expressing comradeship" . if this is how the Lord will address those who have crucified Him afresh- surely there is hope, abundant hope, for us.

The Sheep

The figure of judgment in the parables of judgment would suggest a grim faced judge, with all the dignity and soberness of the courtroom, whatever the verdict is. But there are elements of unreality in the pictures of judgment which are put before us in the parables. This judge is emotionally involved in each case (unheard of in a human court); He exalts: " Well done...enter thou into the joy of thy Lord" (Mt. 25:23). The picture of the happy judge, breaking down in joy at the verdict, inviting the hesitant believer to share his joy in their victory. The picture seems so imaginable; " enter thou into the joy of thy Lord" suggests a reticence, an unbelief, at the outcome. Compare this with the one hour labourers receiving a day's pay (Mt. 20:9), and the faithful almost remonstrating with their Lord that they have not done the things He reminds them of (Mt. 25:38-40) (2). But we will overcome our reticence; we *will* enter our Lord's joy; for we shall stand before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy (Jude 24). The Master is so delighted that His servants are watching for Him that He immediately sits down and gets a meal ready for them, doing the serving Himself (Lk. 12:37). There is an arresting element of unreality here. Would a Master really do this, at such an unlikely time at night, would he really serve himself, and would he really be so glad that the servants were waiting up for him? But these elements of unreality serve to teach the lessons: that the Lord will have unspeakable joy at His return because of our expectancy of the second coming, and He will surprise us by His glee and enthusiasm for us. In Him, in that day, will be fulfilled Zeph. 3:17: " The Lord thy God in the midst of thee...He will save, He will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing. I will gather them that are sorrowful (us) for the solemn assembly" , when the Lord will keep Passover with us again.

As stressed above, the purpose of the judgment is for our benefit, to develop our appreciation and self-knowledge. This is perhaps reflected by the ten pound man saying that Christ's pound had gained, had worked to create (Gk.) the ten pounds he could now offer (Lk. 19:16). The man who achieved five pounds uses a different word in describing how the pound given him had made five pounds (Lk. 19:18), while the men in Mt. 25:20,22 uses yet another word to say the same thing. This is surely a realistic picture, each of the faithful comes to the same conclusion, that what spirituality they have developed is an outcome of the basic Gospel given to each of us at our conversion; yet they express this same basic idea in different words. The place of basic doctrine as the basis for the development of all true spirituality should need no further stress, if the Lord's teaching here is appreciated. But in the present easy-going attitude of the brotherhood, the importance of basic doctrine *does* need stressing the more. The man who didn't develop as he should have done accuses the Lord of reaping what he didn't sow (Lk. 19:21). But the Lord does sow the seed of the basic Gospel, as the parable of the sower makes clear. The point is that the unworthy fail to let that seed bring forth fruit, they fail to see that the Lord expects fruit from those doctrines they have been given. But they fail to see the link between the basic Gospel and practical spirituality; they feel he's reaping where he didn't sow. Christ will require His own, i.e. that which he has sown, the basic Truths of the Gospel, with usury (Lk. 19:23). The parable of the tiny seed moving the great mountain was surely making the same point; the basic Gospel, if properly

believed, will result in the most far reaching things (Mt. 17:20 cp. 13:31). There is an element of unreality in the parables of the judgment, especially that of the pounds: wise use of a few coins results in power over several cities. We are left to imagine the men marvelling in disbelief at the reward given to them. They expected at most just a few pounds to be given to them. And in their response we see a picture of the almost disbelief of the faithful at their rewards.

Attitude To Others

One of the themes of the parables of judgment is that our attitude to our brethren will have an impact on the outcome of the judgment. Mt. 25:45 seems to suggest that our attitude to the weak ones of the ecclesia will especially be considered by the Lord. Of course, He knows the verdict and why He has reached it already; but it seems that the parable is teaching that *we* will be brought to realize that our attitude to our weak brethren has such an impact on our position before the Lord. For then we will realize that we are all weak. Consider His repeated emphasis on the importance of our attitude to others, to using the Truth we have been given in the service of others:

- The 'unjust steward' was saved because he forgave others their debts after getting into a mess himself. He wasted his Lord's goods, as the prodigal did (Lk. 15:13 connects with 16:2). Seeing the prodigal represents all of us, the lesson is surely that we all waste our Lord's goods, therefore the basis of salvation is through our forgiving others as an outcome of our own faith in the Lord's grace. This is one explanation of why the parable of the steward flows straight on from that of the prodigal.
- The rich man was condemned for not helping Lazarus.
- The Pharisee was condemned not just for being self-righteous but especially for his despising of his sinful brother.
- The one talent man was rejected because he didn't give his talent to the Gentiles and earn usury for the Lord.
- The big debtor was rejected because he wouldn't forgive his brother. The Lord says that He will make such a person pay all the debt (Mt. 18:36). There is a connection here with an earlier parable, where He spoke of how unless a man agrees with his adversary quickly, the adversary will drag him to court and jail until he pays all that is due (Mt. 5:26). The adversary of the parable, therefore, is the Lord Himself. He is the aggressive invader marching against us with an invincible army (Lk. 14:31), with whom we must make peace by total surrender. Putting the Lord's teaching in context, He is showing Himself to be very harsh and demanding on the unforgiving believer, but very soft and almost unacceptably gracious to those who show forgiveness. Consider these aspects of the parables of judgment:
- The elder son went out of the Father's fellowship because he couldn't accept the return of the younger son.
- Many will be rejected at the judgment because they refused to care for their weak brethren.
- The drunken steward was condemned because he failed to feed the rest of the household and beat them.

- The lamp went out because it was kept under a bucket rather than giving light to others.
- Perhaps the hard working labourers were sent packing by the Lord because of their complaint at the others getting the same payment for what they considered to be inferior work to theirs. If the parable is meant to be read in this way, then it seems so sad that those hard working men (cp. brethren) were *almost* saved, but for their attitude to their brethren.

The RSV renders 2 Cor. 5:10 as teaching that we will be judged according to the deeds we have done in "the body", and it may just be that Paul had in mind 'the body of Christ'. Our actions there, to our brethren, will be the basis of our judgment. To keep the faith to ourselves without reaching out into the world of others was therefore foreseen by the Lord as a very major problem for us. And indeed it is. Disinterest in ecclesial meetings and overseas brethren, unwillingness to really enter into the struggles of others, apathy towards preaching, all often as a result of an obsession with ones' own family...this is surely the sort of thing the Lord foresaw. We all have the desire to keep our faith to ourselves, to hold onto it personally on our own little island...and it was this attitude which the Lord so repeatedly and trenchantly criticized. And in his demanding way, He implied that a failure in this would cost us the Kingdom. He more than any other must have known the desire for a desert island spiritual life; but instead He left the 99 righteous and went up into the mountains (i.e. He prayed intensely, after the pattern of Moses for Israel?), in order to find the lost sheep (Mt. 18:12). In a sense the judgment process has already begun; Mt. 18:24 says that the Lord has "begun to reckon" now, and so now we must urgently forgive one another. He is watching our attitude to each other here and now. Mt. 18:33,35 teach that the attitude we have towards our brother deep in our heart will be revealed and discussed with us at the judgment.

The lighting of the candle is a symbol of our conversion (Mt. 25:1; Heb. 10:32). Our lamps were lit by the Lord Jesus (Lk. 8:16; Heb. 10:32) for the purpose of giving light to the house. The Lord lights a lamp in order to search for His lost coin, that weak brother or sister that means as much to Him on a deep, indescribably personal level as a woman's dowry money in the Middle East (cp. a wedding ring; Lk. 15:8). But the lamp He lights is us. This is yet another example of His parables being intended to fit together. We must burn as a candle now, in shedding forth the light, or we will be burnt at the judgment (Mt. 5:15 and Jn. 15:6 use the same words). This is but one of many examples of the logic of endurance; we must burn anyway, so why not do it for the Lord's sake and reap the reward? The ecclesias, groups of believers, are lampstands (Rev. 2:5 cp. Ps. 18:28). We must give forth the light, not keep it under a bucket, because "there is nothing hid which shall not be manifested; neither was any thing kept secret, but that it should come abroad" (Mk. 4:21,22). In other words, the very reason why God has hidden the things of His word from the world and some aspects of them from our brethren, is so that we can reveal them to them.

If we don't shine forth the light, both in the world and in the household, we are not fulfilling the purpose for which we were called. Perhaps this is the meaning of Acts 16:10, where Luke says that they preached in Macedonia because they perceived that "the Lord had called us *for* (in order that) to preach the gospel (in this case) unto (the Macedonians)". Whether such an interpretation appeals or not, there are many passages which teach that our salvation will be related to the extent to which we have held forth the word both to the world and to the household (Prov. 11:3; 24:11,12; Dan. 12:3; Mk. 8:38; Lk. 12:8; Rom. 10:9,10 cp. Jn. 9:22; 12:42; 1:20; 1 Pet. 4:6 Gk.). Those who reap the harvest of the Gospel will be rewarded with salvation (Jn. 4:36). Such work *isn't* just an option for those who want to be enthusiastic about it. With what measure we give to others in these ways, we will be measured to at the

judgment (Mk. 4:24 and context). 1 Cor. 3:9-15 likewise teaches that the spiritual "work" of "any man" with his brethren will be proportionate to his reward at the judgment. Paul certainly saw his reward as proportionate to the quality of his brethren (2 Cor. 1:14; 1 Thess. 2:19,20; Phil. 2:16; 4:1).

The Senior Slave

Mt. 24:42-50 teach that the servant who must feed the household with appropriate food represents each of us; he must watch for the Lord's return and be diligent in feeding the household; yet (it must be stressed), this parable is intended for each of us (cp. Mk. 13:37). If he doesn't do this, he is rejected. We are set a high standard here. Christ is "the goodman of the house", i.e. the senior slave who is responsible for all the others (Mt. 20:11), but here "the goodman of the house" represents each of us (Mt. 24:43; Lk. 12:39,40). We are in Him, and therefore we must try to share His level of concern for His household. He carried His cross for us, for our salvation. And He asks us to share His cross, i.e. His devotion to the body of believers, even unto death.

The "porter" was commanded to watch (Mk. 13:34); and he represents us all (Mk. 13:37). Watching over God's household is an idea taken from Ez. 3:17; as the prophets in the Old Testament parables of judgment were the watchmen of the house of Israel, so each of us are. When the Lord had earlier told this parable, Peter (like us) asked the obvious question: "Speakest thou this parable unto us (the twelve in the first century), or even to all?" (Lk. 12:41). The Lord's basic reply was "To all", although He didn't say so explicitly. Instead He said that if the Lord of the servant was away and came back unexpectedly, late at night, what a joy it would be to him if he found the lights on and the servant working diligently in caring for the others; *any* servant doing that is going to give his Lord joy; 'So, Peter, don't think about whether others are called to do the job, this is the ideal servant, you're all servants, so you get on and try to be like this ideal servant!'. The porter's job was to keep out wolves; the Greek for "porter" literally means 'the watcher' (s.w. Jn. 10:1, another example of how the parables fit together). An apathy in looking out for false teachers means we aren't doing the porter's job well, we are sleeping rather than looking after the household. Mt. 24:43-45 define watching for Christ's return as tending to the needs of our brethren; this is what will lead our hearts towards preparedness for the second coming, rather than the hobby of trying to match current events with Bible prophecy.

" God the judge of all"

One final feature of the parables of judgment calls for attention. They often speak of the Lord Jesus as if He is the role of God. This shows the intensity of God manifestation there will be in Christ at the day of judgment; and yet the way Christ manifests God so closely is seen in other parables too. Thus Mt. 15:13 speaks of the Father as the sower, whilst Mt. 13:24,37 applies this figure to the Lord Jesus. Likewise in the parables of Lk. 15, God the Father lost the Son, but Christ, the seed of the woman, lost the coin, and He was the shepherd who lost the sheep. In constructing these parables as He did, surely the Lord was emphasizing that the Father and Son are absolutely united in their attitude to us; it is on account of this that the Father can really know our feelings as Christ does, even though He has never been human. Many of the descriptions of Christ in the parables are taken from Old Testament passages describing the feelings of *God* towards Israel, showing the truth of this in the first century context when Israel were still God's people. Thus the Lord's description of Himself as a hen wishing to gather the chicks of Jerusalem (Mt. 23:37) is based on Is. 31:5: "As mother-birds

flying, so will the Lord defend Jerusalem" Heb.). Yet Lk. 13:8 could suggest that Christ's attitude to Israel was even more patient than that of God Himself; yet because their feelings to Israel are identical, the implication is perhaps that the Son enables and thereby persuades the Father to be even more patient with us than He would naturally be!

Notes

(1) And if we consider why there will be a Millennium instead of the Kingdom just starting, surely the answer must be that it is for *our* benefit, a preparation for us to enter the fully established Kingdom. Some of the mortals of the last generation will be given the opportunity to be the mortal inhabitants of the Millennium, whilst millions of others in previous generations have lived and died without hope. It seems one of the reasons why they will be there is for our benefit.

(2) This all suggests that even after our acceptance at the judgment, we may be more 'human' than we may now imagine. Some will be in the Kingdom who have big questions about the justice of God (Mt. 20:12,13 " friend"); the elder son is apparently accepted in the Father's fellowship, although his attitude to his weak brother is so wrong (Lk. 15:31); the wise virgins, apparently selfishly, won't give any oil to the others; some will sit in the Kingdom in " shame" because they thought they were greater than other brethren (Lk. 14:9- cp. the elder brother?); some remonstrate that a highly rewarded brother already has ten pounds, and surely doesn't need any more exaltation (Lk. 19:25).

3-10 Divine Delegation

The parables several times speak of the relationship between our Master and ourselves. They do so in somewhat unreal and arresting terms. It would've made everyone think when the Lord spoke of how a master handed over a total of eight talents to His servants and told them to use them as best they could. This was, humanly speaking, a huge and unreal risk for a master to take. He *so* trusted those servants! And so much has the Lord delegated to each of us, entrusting us with the Gospel. And we can imagine His joy when they lived up to the trust He placed in them. We can also imagine them walking away from their meeting with Him, wondering why ever He had entrusted so much to them, feeling nervous, praying for strength to act responsibly and zealously. Think about how large were the talents given to the workers (Mt. 25:14-30). The talent was worth 6,000 denarii, i.e. 20 years' wages for the workers in the parable of the labourers (Mt. 10:1-16). This is a huge and unrealistic amount to give to a servant to have responsibility for! But this is the huge responsibility which passes to us in having been called to the Gospel. Likewise, what human Owner of a vineyard who give out his vineyard to *other* tenants, after the first lot had proven so wicked, and killed not only His servants but His beloved Son? But this speaks of God's amazing desire to keep on delegating His affairs to frail mortals.

The Lord was addressed as 'Rabbi' and to some extent acted like one. It was the well known duty of a rabbi's pupils to serve their teacher and do menial chores for him; the Jewish writings of the time and the Mishnah are full of references to this. Yet the Lord treated His 'servants' radically differently- His behaviour at the Last Supper was just the opposite (Lk. 22:26). And He even taught that He, the Lord of all, would be so happy that His servants

were waiting for Him that He would “come forth and serve them” (Lk. 12:37). He was a most unusual “Lord and Master”, one who served His servants, and whose death for them was His ultimate act of service. The Lord speaks of how we are not so much slaves, as friends of His, who are obedient to His commands (Jn. 15:15). To the Lord’s first hearers, a slave was defined by his or her obedience to the master’s commands. The Lord says that His followers are His friends, who do His commandments- but they’re not slaves. He seems to be saying that they were indeed His slaves- but a new kind of slave, a slave who whilst being obedient to the Master, was also His personal friend. It’s lovely how the Lord speaks of such well known ideas like slavery, and shows how in the humdrum of ordinary life, He gives an altogether higher value to them. It’s like in the imagery of sheep. This unreal shepherd not only dies for the sheep but gives them eternal life, making them eternal sheep (Jn. 10:28). We’d understand it more comfortably if He spoke of giving His life for people, and then them living for ever. But He speaks of giving eternal life to a sheep, who wouldn’t have a clue what that really entailed. But that’s just how it is with us, who by grace are receiving an eternal Kingdom, the wonderful implications of which are beyond our appreciation, due to the intrinsic limitations of who we are as sheep.

The Father has given us huge freewill and an amazing amount of self determination. Divine delegation is one of His great characteristics as a Father. It would have been highly unusual for any father to agree to liquidate part of the family estate ahead of time, just so as to give in to the will of a wayward son who totally rejected him. And yet the father did this; he liquidated part of the family inheritance to give it to a son who wanted to openly quit the family. This is how much the Father is willing to give us the essential desires of our own hearts, how much He is willing to allow us to go our own way, so that we may serve Him of our own freewill.

In the culture of the orient, it was not usual for a person to keep money in a cloth. Their culture was to trade and barter with what they had. That a man should just bury such a talent was therefore unreal for the original hearers. The point of this unreality is surely that spiritual laziness is *so* bad. It was better to have traded and lost through genuine mistakes, through naivety, through the betrayal and deception of others, than to simply *do nothing*. I fear, really fear, that our Christian culture has bred for many of us a ‘do nothing’ culture- which is exactly what this element of unreality is warning against. We can delegate responsibility to church committees, to others, to our leaders; or we can do nothing out of fear, fear of making a mistake, fear of taking a risk, fear of what other brethren may think of us... all the time denying this principle of Divine delegation. And it might be added that the ‘do nothing’ man of the parable emphasized that the talent or money was not *his*; he returned to his Lord what was his [*thy* talent]. In order to trade it, or even to put it in the bank and get interest, he had to take personal ownership of it. And this he failed to do. And it is just this that we are being asked to do by our Lord- that His truth, all that He has given us, is in a sense *ours* now, to be used on our initiative, for His glory and service. Indeed, the reward of the faithful will be to be given *more* of their Lord’s riches in the Kingdom, with which likewise to use their initiative in order to bring Him glory. We are left to think how the story might have gone on- the faithful were given *more* talents and they go away and do, in the Kingdom age, what they did in this life- using what they were given for *His glory and service, on their own initiative*.

The parable of the widow who keeps nagging the free-wheeling judge is again rather humanly unlikely. Would such a tough guy really pay attention to the repeated requests of the woman? But although he considers himself independent of both God and men, he ends up

being controlled by the widow. This reflects the immense power which there is in human prayer, and God's willingness to respond if we are importunate enough.

3-11 Unanswered Questions In The Parables

We have seen only one theme in the parables- the elements of unreality which there are in them all. But there are others which can be discovered. The parables, especially those which Luke records, appear to end leaving us with unanswered questions. Does the wounded traveller survive and get better? When does the Samaritan return? How much does it cost him? Was the beaten man happy to see the Samaritan when he returned? Who inherits the property of the rich fool? Does the barren fig tree produce a crop in the end? Does the elder brother finally join in the party? Does the unjust steward succeed in getting himself out of his problems after his dismissal? What happens to the rich man's five brothers, seeing Lazarus isn't allowed to go and warn them? Do they hear Moses and the prophets? Do the riff raff come in from the lanes to the Great Supper? Does the unjust judge actually resolve the widow's complaints? How does the rich merchant survive, after having sold all he has for the one pearl, thus discarding his entire past, his life's work...? And what does he do with the pearl? He, presumably, sits and treasures it, but can do nothing with it in order to prosper materially... And yet we are left to reflect upon this. Or the man who sells all to buy the field containing the treasure (Mt. 13:44)- what does he *do* with his newly found wealth? The question, of course, buds us reflect what we have done with the wealth of the Gospel which we have found. These open-ended parables with unanswered questions are left hanging because the point is, it all depends upon our response as to how they end in our cases! The parables are thus not just cosy stories. They challenge our response. Our tidy images of reality are shattered by the open endings and elements of unreality in the parables. Our minds are arrested and teased by them, as they lead us to self-realization, self-knowledge, at times even healthy self-condemnation.

For example, does the man with 10,000 men faced with the oncoming army of God with 20,000 men just recklessly go ahead, or does he seek reconciliation? There was surely an intended connection within the Lord's teaching concerning how the loving Father saw the prodigal son "afar off" in his sin and separation; and how the King [God] coming against man with 20,000 men in battle needs to be reconciled with whilst He is still "afar off" (Lk. 14:32; 15:20). God is both coming towards us in judgment; and yet also sees us 'from afar' in untold grace and desire to save. It is this wondrous paradox which makes the ultimate meeting of God and man so intense and wonderful. The 'harder side of God', the King coming in overpowering judgment against sinful man, is what gives power and poignancy to His final meeting with man as the Father meets the prodigal.

One of the most telling examples of an unfinished ending is to be found in the parable of the unjust steward. This is perhaps the hardest parable to interpret; but I suggest the thought is along the following lines (1). The steward has done wrong; but the element of unreality is that he isn't jailed or even scolded, it's just left as obvious that he can't do the job of steward any longer. The usual response of a master would be to jail servants for running up debts (Mt. 8:23-25). But the Master is unusually gracious. The steward now faces poverty, and so he takes a huge gamble. Before news of his fall is common knowledge, he urgently runs around to those in his master's debt and tells them that their debts are forgiven. His haste is reflected in the way he says "Write quickly... and you... ". He has to write off their debts before his master finds out, and before the debtors know that he now has no right to be forgiving them their debts. His gamble is that his master is indeed such a generous and gracious guy that he

will actually uphold these forgivenesses or reductions of debt, and that therefore those who have received this forgiveness will be grateful to the steward, and be generous to him later, maybe giving him employment. The story reflects a theme of the other parables- how the servant knows and understands his master extremely well, and can guess his response. The way the servant invites the beggars to the feast even before his master has told him to do so is an example. But the power of the parable is in the unended story. Does the gracious Master indeed forgive those in his debt? And seeing he is impressed by how the steward has acted, does he in fact re-instate him, impressed as he obviously is by this sinful steward's perception of his grace? From the other parables we are led to believe that yes, the Lord and Master is indeed this gracious. And of course we are to see ourselves in the desperate position of the steward, staking our whole existences upon His grace and love beyond all reason. For me, this approach to the parable is the only one which can make any sense of the master dismissing the steward for fraud, and then praising him for his apparently 'dishonest' behaviour in forgiving the debtors (Lk. 16:2,8).

In all this we see the brilliance of the Lord Jesus. The parables of Lk. 7 and 14 were told during a meal- perhaps many of the others were, too. The Lord would have been a brilliant conversationalist, drawing out unexpected challenges and lessons from what appeared to be everyday facts. The implications of the parables are not pleasant- they would have soured some of His table conversations if they were properly perceived. And likewise with us as we read them in this age; these stories are indeed profoundly disturbing if understood properly and allowed to take their effect upon us. Yet for all their challenge, the parables of Jesus reveal how deeply familiar He was with human life in all its daily issues and complexities. He artlessly revealed how He had meditated deeply upon the issues involved in farming, the problem of weeds, how much poor men were paid for a day's work, the desperation of the beggar Lazarus, problems faced by builders when laying foundations... He was and is truly sensitive and understanding of the everyday issues of our lives, and yet draws out of them something deeply challenging and radical. In this was and is His surpassing, magnetic brilliance. But the unanswered questions in the parables aren't all there is to them.

On top, or underneath, of all we have here spoken about His parables, there's yet something else. Much homework awaits someone to work out all the times when the Lord was speaking *to Himself* in the parables, through the elements of unreality. Perhaps He saw Himself tempted to be like the elder brother in the Prodigal parable, who was "always" in the Father's house (as Jesus per Jn. 8:35) and 'everything the father has is his' is the very wording of Jn. 17:10. Or is it co-incidence that the only time the Greek word translated "choked" is used outside the sower parable, it's about the crowds 'thronging' Jesus (Lk. 8:14,42- note how they're in the same chapter and section of the Lord's life)? Was the Lord not aware of how the pressure of the crowds, whom He carefully tried to avoid, could choke His own spiritual growth? Was it for this reason that He begged those He cured not to generate big crowds to throng Him? And thus yet another layer of the Lord's mind and thinking will be revealed to us.

Notes

(1) My thinking here has been heavily influenced by the background material in K.E. Bailey, *Poet And Peasant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) pp. 98,99.

3-12 The Parable Of The Prodigal (1)

Introduction

Forgiveness is something which man receives both in a one off sense at baptism, and also in an ongoing stream throughout daily life. Both these aspects of forgiveness are brought home to us in this parable of the prodigal. Because the wonder of forgiveness is so hard to fully appreciate, seeing that we experience so much of it so frequently, the parable of the prodigal son uses a variety of Biblical allusions to bring home the reality of forgiveness to us. The series of three 'forgiveness' parables which the prodigal concludes is set in the context of Lk.15:1: " Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him" , the double mention of " him" indicating the spiritual charisma which the Lord holds over those desperately seeking righteousness. These parables were therefore designed to motivate these sinners to repent, highlighting the joy which true repentance can give to our Father. If only we would realize the gravity of our every day sins, the parables of the prodigal should have a like effect on us.

Prodigal Israel

As with most of the parables, the prodigal has a primary reference to the nation of Israel. The many Old Testament allusions bring this home without doubt. In practice, this means that the intensity of repentance which Israel will eventually manifest should be seen in our contrition at sin. In this lies a real challenge. The following allusions demonstrate that our Lord clearly intended us to make a connection between the prodigal and apostate Israel- and therefore with ourselves:

- The father falling on the prodigal's neck and kissing him sends the mind back to Joseph weeping on Benjamin's neck (another younger brother), typical of Christ's receiving home of a repentant Israel in the last days. As Joseph commanded his servants " Bring these men home, and slay, and make ready" (Gen.43:16), so the father did likewise (Lk.15:23). Both repentances were celebrated with a meal of fellowship (cp. the breaking of bread). Both the prodigal and the sons humbled themselves to the position of servants. Like the prodigal, Israel were often brought back to their spiritual senses by famine (Ruth 1:1; 1 Kings 8:37; Lk.4:25 etc.). His realization that " I perish with hunger" (Lk.15:17) matches the description of Jacob in Canaan as " A Syrian ready to perish" (Dt.26:5), dwelling in a land that was 'perishing through the famine' (Gen.41:36). This affliction came upon natural Israel because of their 'murder' of Joseph / Jesus. The prodigal's profligacy is therefore to be seen as the crucifying of Christ afresh by the believer.

- The prodigal Israel went " into a far country" (Lk.15:13) - a phrase normally used in the Old Testament concerning the Gentile lands of Israel's dispersion (Dt.29:22; 1 Kings 8:41,46; 2 Kings 20:14; 2 Chron.6:32,36). In passing, the " far country" of Lk.19:12 and 20:9 should also refer to the lands of the Gentiles; *this* is where Christ has gone (as well as Heaven) , and will return to Israel when they desire him to. As with so many of the parables, this one is packed with allusions to the Proverbs. The " far country" recalls Prov.25:25: " As cold waters to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country" . Like many Proverbs, this is alluding to the Law- concerning how Israel would return from the " far country" of their dispersion upon their repentance. The sense of refreshment and exhilaration which this gives God should surely motivate us to repent, and also to encourage others to do so. Yet we need to ask whether we feel this same exaltation of spirit as God does " over one sinner that repenteth" .

It requires selflessness, and a real desire to see glory given to our Father.

- Our association of the prodigal with Israel in dispersion is strengthened by the mention that the prodigal "wasted" the Father's riches, the Greek meaning 'to scatter abroad'- suggesting that as Israel had wastefully scattered God's riches in the Gospel, so they too were scattered. Note how the prodigal is pictured as ending up with the pigs- well known symbol of the Gentiles. As the Son's return to the Father was matched by His going out to meet the son, when Israel "return unto the Lord...then the Lord thy God will...return and gather thee from all the nations" (Dt.30:2,3).

- The book of Hosea frequently presents prodigal Israel as the one who went astray from God, her loving Father and husband, committing adultery with the surrounding countries, with the result that God cast her off, leaving her to suffer in those very lands whose idols she had worshipped. Her sense of shame and knowledge of God's constant love then brought her to her senses (Hos. 2; 5:11-15; 6:1; 7:8-10). There can be little doubt that our Lord had his eye on this symbology when framing the prodigal parable. Hos.2:7,8 is the clearest example: "She shall follow after her lovers...she shall seek them, but shall not find them: then shall she say, I will go and return to my first husband; for then was it better with me than now. For she did not know that I gave her corn, and wine, and oil, and multiplied her silver and gold (cp. the father giving the son his substance), which they prepared for Baal". These blessings of corn, wine and oil are referring to the blessings for obedience promised in Dt.28. The point is being made that these blessings were not immediately and totally removed once Israel started to go astray. This demonstrates how material 'blessings' are not necessarily an indication that we have favour with God. Consuming the Father's substance "with harlots" (Lk.15:30) is therefore parallel to giving it to idols. The spiritual riches of being in covenant with God, as well as our every material blessing from Him, were frittered away by Israel. Saying that doctrine doesn't matter, that other churches have fellowship with God, giving our time and money to the surrounding world, all this is flinging with whores and bowing before idols. There is a direct equivalence between these things, in God's sight. God's "hand" worked upon Israel to make them realize the seriousness of their ways (Hos.2:10). This fact starts to plumb the depth of God's love- that even with those who have broken His covenant, God's hand is still working to lead them to repentance.

- Jer.31:18-20 describe how Ephraim moans: "Thou hast chastised me...turn thou me, and I shall be turned...after that I was turned, I repented; and after that I was instructed...I was ashamed...because I did bear the reproach of my youth. Is Ephraim my dear son?...since I spake against him, I do earnestly remember him still...I will surely have mercy upon him, saith the Lord". We must not think from this that God just chose to turn Israel (the prodigal) back to him at a certain moment. It was because God "spoke against him", through which the prodigal was "instructed", that he turned back.

- There is reason to see the family portrayed in the parable as being a priestly family- thus representing prodigal Israel, "a Kingdom of priests". The son did not ask for his share of the inheritance, but of "the portion of goods" - remember that Levites did not own any land. There is surely an echo of the curse on Eli's priestly family in the prodigal parable: "Every one that is left in thine house shall come and crouch...for a piece of silver and a morsel of bread, and shall say, Put me, I pray thee, into one of the priests offices, that I may eat a piece of bread" (1 Sam.2:36). The Father had "hired servants", which takes us back to the reference in Lev.22:10 to the priests having "hired servants" in their household, who would have performed the mundane work for them (cp. the Gibeonites). The prodigal was therefore

asking to be admitted back into God's service, resigning all the spiritual superiorities he could have enjoyed through being of the priestly line. Similarly latter day Israel will be willing to be accepted by God as Gentiles, having resigned their trust in their natural lineage. Our attitude on repentance ought to be similar- just wanting to quietly, humbly participate in God's family for the joy of being close to Him. Further indication that the hired servants represent the Gentiles is found in the fact that they had " bread enough" (Gk. 'an abundance of loaves'), connecting with the Gentiles of Mt.14:20 being " filled" (same word in Lk.15:16) with the abundance of loaves created by Christ.

- The parable of the lost son complements that of the lost sheep earlier in the same chapter. " My people hath been lost sheep" , " the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Jer. 50:6; Mt.10:6; 15:24). A comparison of the parable with Hos.7:9,10 indicates that most of Israel remain as the prodigal in the pig country: " Strangers have devoured his strength (cp. " devoured thy substance"), and he knoweth it not...they do not return to the Lord their God, nor seek him for all this" . The illogicality of Israel remaining in their pathetic spiritual position is so apparent to us from this; yet we of the new Israel can also be crazy enough to go on living out of real fellowship with God.

The reason for presenting such a catalogue of evidence is to show that prodigal Israel's latter day repentance will be of a similar intensity of repentance to ours in this life. They will mourn and weep with a rare intensity of self-hate and self-knowledge- even as a father for his only son. Do we shed tears on repentance? Do we realize, as they will, how our sins brought about the crucifixion? Do we appreciate that our spiritual indifference and lack of perception means that we, like Israel, " did esteem him stricken" , seeing no beauty in him (Is.53:2-5) as we march through our lives, unthinking as to the power and beauty of the cross?

The Spirit Of The Law

There are a number of other Old Testament bases for the prodigal parable. Significantly, several of these in the Proverbs portray the younger son's repentance as a model fulfillment of the spirit of the Mosaic law (upon which Proverbs is so often a commentary). For example, it is the wise son who is told: " Hear thou, my son, and be wise...be not among winebibbers...a whore is a deep ditch...the glutton shall come to poverty: and drowsiness shall clothe a man with rags. Harken unto thy father...the father of the righteous shall greatly rejoice: and he that begetteth a wise child shall have joy of him" (Prov.23:19-26). There are evident connections here with the prodigal. God's rejoicing over his return was therefore on account of the son's wisdom through hearkening to the Father's word. Thus God's joy is not just in the emotional recognition of the fact that we are in bad conscience with Him, and want to do something about it. True repentance is a result of really grasping the true wisdom of God, applying ourselves intellectually to it.

We are left to conclude that it was the son's reflection upon the Father's word which lead him to return to Him, as will be true of prodigal Israel in the last days. " Whoso loveth wisdom rejoiceth his father: but he that keepeth company with harlots spendeth his substance" (Prov.29:3) was clearly in the Lord's mind when constructing his parable. He evidently saw this proverb as applying to the same person in time of sin and repentance. Repenting and loving wisdom are therefore paralleled, showing again that repentance is not just a twinge of conscience, but involves coming to really know God. The prodigal wished to return home so that he could share in the loaves which the servants had " to spare" , or (better), " had in abundance" . This same word occurs in Jn.6:12 concerning the bread which " remained" , i.e.

was in abundance, after the feeding of the five thousand. In that acted parable, the bread represented the abundance of spiritual food which is in the spirit-words of Christ. It was this which the truly repentant sinner earnestly seeks, rather than a mere salving of conscience. " Whoso keepeth the law is a wise son: but he that is a companion of riotous men shameth his father" (Prov. 28:7) shows that such genuine repentance and knowing of God's wisdom is effectively reckoned as keeping the letter of the Law. " A wise servant shall have rule over a son that causeth shame, and shall have part of the inheritance" (Prov.17:2) seems to also connect with our parable; implying that the wise son who was willing to be a servant was ultimately greater than the son who appeared to be technically obedient to the letter of the law. Likewise, the son desiring to be fed with the husks of the pig food may connect with Lazarus desiring to be fed with the crumbs from the rich man's table (Lk.16:21). Yet Lazarus is representative of the repentant sinner who is ultimately justified. The degree to which God will so totally impute righteousness to us is indeed hard to come to terms with. But it is faith in this which will be our ultimate salvation.

The Prodigal's Repentance: Baptism?

This parable describes the general principle of repentance; yet we are repentant at many times and varying circumstances. Because of this, there are a number of well sustainable interpretations possible. There are a number of reasons for associating the prodigal's leaving the pigs of the Gentile world with baptism; after the pattern of Israel's exodus, we understand that our repentance and exit from the world and its thinking is symbolized by baptism (1 Cor.10:1). In this case, our whole life after baptism is like the journey home of the prodigal-with nervousness, growing confidence and bitter regret and realization of our sins, we are stumbling home, desperately willing for just the humblest place of acceptance in God's family. And every step of our difficult, hungry journey the Father is having compassion upon us, and running out to meet us, searching for the lost sheep. There are so many references to God seeking out His people, and also to our seeking God. All our lives this process is working out; we seek for God, as He seeks for the development of a true spirituality in us. " Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you" (James 4:8) is surely an allusion to the prodigal parable. Every day of our lives, as we struggle with our natural fear and faithlessness, this fact should gloriously motivate us in our spiritual strivings. The first thing which the prodigal says at his meeting with the Father is " Father, I have sinned" (Lk.15:21). Surely our first stammerings at judgment day may be similar? Think of it. As you behold the glory of the Father in the face of Jesus Christ, what will the first thoughts and words really be? Yet the overflowing love of the Father almost brushed all that aside in assuring that timid boy of his acceptance and vital place in the Father's mind. The Father's speed and zeal is captured by the repeated use of the conjunction " and" : " His father saw him, *and* had compassion, *and* ran, *and* fell on his neck, *and* kissed him" . The son's careful preparation of his request for mercy was needful for him, but not for the Father. This is a precise allusion to the spirit of Is.65:24: " Before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear" . This is primarily concerning God's relationship with men in the Millennium. Yet our daily experience of forgiveness now should give us a foretaste of the glorious sense of restoration with God which will be ours in the Kingdom.

The joyful homecoming and celebration feast after the prodigal's repentance then equates with the marriage feast which will begin the Millennium. The fatted calf which was killed therefore connects with the " fatlings" which were killed for the marriage supper of the Kingdom in Mt.22:4. And those Jews who refused the invitation to join in that feast easily equate with the elder brother. " Let us eat and be merry" (Lk.15:23) is alluded to by the Lord

in his later description of the marriage supper: " Let us be glad and rejoice...for the marriage of the lamb is come" (Rev.19:7). " Enter thou into the joy of thy lord" (Mt.25:21) is the equivalent in the parable of the virgins. There is good reason to think that our Lord consciously designed his parables to allude to each other, and thus build up a more complete picture of his teaching.

Detailed Proof

Now for some more detailed proof of this powerful analogy of the prodigal's repentance:

- In the pig country, the son lived with " riotous living" (Lk.15:13). The same Greek word occurs in 1 Pet.4:4 concerning Gentiles (and also the latter day apostasy within the ecclesia?) living in " excess of riot" .

- The context of the parable is set by Lk.15:2. It was in response to the Pharisees' criticism of Jesus that he received sinners and ate with them. Jesus is replying by showing that the meal he ate with them was in the spirit of the joyful feasting occasioned by the finding of the lost coin, and the return of the prodigal. The prodigal's repentance is thus likened to those who were responding to Christ's gospel.

- The prodigal " spent all" (Lk.15:14), just as the diseased woman had " spent all" her living (Mk.5:26), and now came to take hold of Christ's mantle of righteousness. This we do at baptism. Other similarities between the prodigal and that widow are to be found in 'Studies In The Gospels' by H.A.W.

- The prodigal's perishing with hunger and desperately needing bread suggests a connection with Jn.6:35: " I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me (cp. the prodigal's return) shall never hunger...him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out" (cp. the receiving back of the prodigal). This coming to Christ is both ongoing and also specifically at baptism.

- The son was attached to a " citizen of that country" , perhaps a personification of the Biblical devil to which we are joined before conversion. He was made free from him the moment he started his journey back. He " was dead, and is alive again" is also baptism language (cp. Rom.6:3-5; Col.2:13). " He arose" from the pigs (Lk.15:20) certainly implies new life and resurrection.

The record of the prodigal's treatment at the homecoming suggests that we are to see in this the sharing of Christ's personal reward with repentant sinners. Removing his rags and clothing him with the best robe recalls Zech.3:4, concerning the very same thing happening to Christ at his glorification. Being given a robe, ring and shoes takes us back to Joseph/Jesus being similarly arrayed in the day of his glory (Gen.41:42). We earlier showed that this parable is rich in reference to the Joseph story, with Joseph's brothers typifying Israel and all sinners. But now there is a powerful twist in the imagery. The sinners (cp. the brothers) now share the reward of the saint (cp. Joseph). This is the very basis of the Gospel of justification in Christ, through having his righteousness imputed to us, so that we can share in his rewards. This will fully be realized at the marriage supper of the lamb, although it also occurs in a sense each time we repent, and live out the parable of the prodigal's repentance again.

Living Out The Parable

It must be evident that apart from at baptism, we each live out the experience of the prodigal in our daily lives, as we come to realize the extent and nature of our sins, and summon the faith in God's love to walk with quickening step back to Him. Association with harlots is a common Biblical symbol of committing sin (see James 1:13-15); all our sins are unfaithfulness against Christ our husband. They are not just passing adulteries; the Spirit uses the even more powerful figure of harlotries. There are quite a number of other references in James to this parable, which indicate that the prodigal's experience can apply in an ongoing sense to the believer after baptism. The son '*spending all*' uses the same word which occurs in James 4:3 concerning the believer who 'asks amiss' (cp. the prodigal's request to his father), that he might "*consume* it (same word) upon (his) lusts". James 4:4 continues: "Ye adulterers...know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God?" . This is all prodigal language. The next verses then seem to go in their allusions, implying that the prodigal is ultimately far more acceptable than the elder brother in the ecclesia: "The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy (cp. the elder brother)...God...giveth grace (forgiveness?) unto the humble...draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you (cp. the prodigal's return being matched by the Father coming to meet him)...let your laughter (cp. the son's "riotous living") be turned to mourning...he that speaketh evil of his brother (is) *not* a doer of the law (as the elder brother thought he was), but a judge" (James 4:5-11).

The sense that the prodigal had of having come to a complete end, realizing the ultimate wretchedness of sin, should be ours when we repent. The prodigal's repentance is ours. The prodigal among the pigs, rising up to return, should be a cameo of our repentances throughout each day. The allusion to the Septuagint of Prov.29:21 shows how that despite having reached such an "end" , there is still a way back: "He that lives wantonly from a child shall be a servant, and in the *end* shall grieve over himself" . Yet we know that after that "end" , the prodigal returned.

The son 'coming to himself' in the prodigal's repentance (Lk.15:17) implies that his life of sin was madness, lived in a haze of semi-consciousness of his real spiritual self. This spiritual anaesthesia is *always* present when we sin. Yet it does not mean that God sees and feels our sins as we do; He has a constancy of spiritual awareness. An appreciation of this may help us in our struggle to sense the true seriousness of sin.

3-13 The Parable Of The Prodigal (2)

Killing The Fatted Calf

"The fatted calf" of Christ is 'killed' by God on our repentance in the sense that He is aware once again of the death of Christ whenever we are granted forgiveness. The spirit of Christ groans for us when we sin, as he did on the cross and in Gethsemane (Rom.8:26). Thus God looks on the travail of Christ's soul when He bears our sins away from us (Is.53:11). To crucify Christ afresh as it were puts Christ through the process of death on behalf of sin once again, but because the believer does not 'resurrect' to newness of life in forsaking the sin, neither does God 'visualize' the Lord's triumph over the sufferings of sin in the resurrection. Such a person has left Christ suffering, travailing in soul, groaning with tears, without any triumph or resurrection.

The son admitted that he had sinned " in thy sight" (Lk.15:21), exactly as David confessed after his sin with Bathsheba (Ps.51:4). In the same way as David openly recognized that he deserved to die, so the prodigal wanted to be made a hireling. Yet in reality, God did not take David's life, the prodigal was not allowed to even get round to saying he wanted to be made a slave (Lk.15:21 cp. 19), shoes being immediately placed on his feet (Lk.15:22) to distinguish him from the barefoot slaves. As God took His repentant wife back to her former status, speaking of her once again as a virgin, so the Father emphasizes: " This *my son* was dead..." (Lk.15:24). The prodigal was dead, but then became alive (Lk.15:32), in the same way as baptism marks both a one-off coming alive with Christ, and also the start of a newness of life in which we are constantly dying to sin and coming alive to God's righteousness (Rom.6:13). Our repentance and subsequent acceptability with God at our baptisms should therefore be on a similar level to our confessions of sinfulness to God after specific sins in our daily lives, and also related to our doing this at the day of judgment.

Yet in the daily round of sin and failure, it is sometimes difficult to sense the degree to which God is actively seeking our return, and willing to slay the fatted calf. The earlier parables of the lost sheep and coin show God actively working to find us; whilst that of the prodigal implies that He is not doing anything physical. Yet the clear connections with the preceding parables show that the woman zealously turning the house upside down must therefore be a figure of the mental energy expended by the Almighty in seeking out our repentance. In our semi-aware spiritual days and hours, before we 'come to ourselves', the Father's active mind is urgently seeking us. Surely this should motivate us in our stronger moments to be aware of the need *not* to sleep into the sleepy madness of spiritual indifference and sin. This indifference is effectively spending our substance with whores and riotous living. We have mentioned that Prov. 29:3 is one of the root passages for the prodigal parable: " Whoso loveth *wisdom* rejoiceth his father: but he that keepeth company with harlots spendeth his *substance*" . There is a parallel here between wisdom and the Father's substance; continuing a popular Biblical theme that God's spiritual riches are to be found in His words of wisdom. An indifference to the spiritual riches which we have been given in the word of Christ is therefore being likened to the prodigal squandering the Father's substance with whores.

It is hard to appreciate that this parable really is intended to be read as having some reference to our daily turning back from our sins- such is the emotional intensity of the story. Yet such is the seriousness of sin that we must see in it an ideal standard to aim for in this regard. The parable alludes to a passage in Job which helps us better appreciate this. The prodigal's confession " I have sinned...in thy sight" , and his returning from spiritual death to life (Lk. 15:21,32) connect well with Job 33:24-30: " His flesh (of the forgiven sinner) shall be fresher than a child's: he shall return to the days of his youth (cp. the prodigal): he shall pray unto God, and He will be favourable unto him: and he shall see his face with joy...if any say (like the prodigal), I have sinned...and it profited me not; He will deliver his soul from the pit, and his life shall see the light. Lo, all these things worketh God *oftentimes* with man" . The prodigal's experience will often be worked out in our lives, the fatted calf slain time and again, and as such we will come to know and appreciate the Father's love even more.

The joyous feast around the fatted calf can therefore speak of the full fellowship with God which we enjoy each time we come to repentance. We saw that the return of Israel in Hos.2 was one of the source passages for the parable. The feast at their return is there described as a betrothal feast. This is obviously a one-off act. Yet such is the constant newness of life which we can experience through continued repentance, that the feasts of joy which we experience

can all have the intensity of a betrothal feast. In like manner our relation with Christ in the Kingdom is likened to a consummation which lasts eternally.

The Elder Brother

In the same way as the Jews refused to appreciate the spirit in which Christ was feasting with the repentant sinners who responded to his message (Lk.15:2), so the elder brother refused to attend the celebrations. Thus he is set up as representative of hard hearted Israel; and all those in the new Israel who share his characteristics proclaim themselves to be aligned with the legalistic Pharisaism which failed to discern the real spirit of Christ when he was among them. A calf, dancing and music recall the scene on Moses' return from the mount (Ex.32:17-19); the elder brother's response as he returned from the field and beheld this sight may well have been rooted in his attempt to place himself in Moses' place. He zealously protested at what he liked to see as rank apostasy when it was actually the display of the real spirit of Christ, in receiving back a lost soul. For all this, the lesson is never learned. Schism after schism have been experienced over this very issue of having repentant brethren take their place at the memorial feast. The bad grace and bitterness of the elder brother as he stormed away from the happy feast is seen all too often amongst us.

The elder brother coming in from the field must be related to the parable about the servant coming home from the field in Lk.17:7-10. The servant should then have prepared the meal, on the master's command, and then admitted that despite having been perfectly obedient, he was still unprofitable. The prodigal parable points the great contrast. *God*, while having every right to order the servant/ elder brother to prepare the meal, is the one who has actually prepared it. *God* asks the elder son to come and eat immediately after returning from the field, rather than ordering him to prepare the meal, as He could so justly have done. Yet despite God's boundless love, the elder son refused to act and think in the spirit of the Father's love.

The corrective to the elder brothers' attitude is provided by the following parable of the unjust steward which comes straight afterwards in Lk.16. The steward was accused of 'wasting' his master's goods (Lk.16:1), using the same Greek word translated "substance" in Lk.15:13, concerning how the son wasted his father's substance. The steward forgave others, and therefore ultimately found a way of escape from his dilemma. The implication is that it was on account of the prodigal being willing to do this, not daring to point the finger at others in the Father's household because of his awareness of his own sins, that he was eventually saved. We can also infer that the elder brother walked out of the Father's fellowship because of his refusal to do this. Again we see how God works through our sins. Because of the prodigal's experience of sin and forgiveness, he was better able to show that vital love and tolerance towards others, without which we cannot receive God's ultimate acceptance. In a sense, it was much *more* difficult for the elder brother.

Our Elder Brother...

Which leads us to one final thought. It was so much harder for Christ to be as patient with sinners as he was, seeing that he himself never sinned and experienced God's forgiveness. There is good reason to think that Jesus was speaking about the elder brother partly to warn himself. He was the favoured son, having the right of the firstborn. He alone could say to God "neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment" (Lk.15:29). The Father's comment "All that I have is thine" (Lk.15:31) connects with the references to God giving *all things* into

the hands of the Son. His constant abiding in the Father's house echoes Jn.8:35: " The servant abideth not in the house for ever: but the Son abideth ever" . Our Lord seems to have been indirectly exhorting himself not to be like the elder brother, thereby setting us the example of framing necessary warning and rebuke of others in terms which are relevant to ourselves. If our perfect Master was so sensitive to his own possibility of failure, how much more should we be, ever analyzing our attitudes to our brethren, " considering (ourselves) lest we also be tempted" .

3-14 The Parable Of The Prodigal (3):

The Unreality In Luke 15

The three parables of the lost which climax in the parable of the lost son all exemplify the principles we have spoken about throughout these studies. They all depend for their power upon the many elements of unreality found within them; and the lost son parable requires us to fill in many details, try to finish the story, and to take due note of the crescendo of 'end stress' which there is. To appreciate the full power and import of these parables, we need to try to read them through the eyes of the Palestinian peasants who first heard them. Correct understanding of Scripture requires us to read it and feel it within the context in which it was first given. Bombarded as we are by billions of pieces of information each day, especially from the internet, we only cope with it all by letting it all fit into the worldviews and assumptions which we've adopted. Words and information and ideas tend to only fit in to what we've already prepared to house them, rather than us seeing *God's* word as something radically different, and allowing it to totally upset and change our cherished worldviews, constructs and approaches to life. God's word is still words- although they are inspired words. The problem with words is that we read or hear them, and interpret them within our frames of reference and culture. Take an example: "She's mad about her flat!". An American takes this to mean that she's angry and frustrated about the puncture / 'flat tire' which she has on her car. But in British English, the phrase would mean: 'She's really happy and enthusiastic about her apartment'. To understand what the speaker or writer means by those words, we have to understand their cultural background. And so it is with the Lord's teaching, aimed as it was to first century peasants.

The Thankless Sons

For those Palestinian peasants, politeness and respect to your father was paramount. Even if you didn't obey your father, you had to be polite to him. Rudeness to your father or public disobedience to him was the worst thing you could do, and you shamed yourself. The Lord turned that understanding on its head in His parable of the two sons in Mt. 21:28-32. He taught that the *better* son was the one who rudely refused to do what his father asked, but later relented and did it. The Lord saw this son as better than the one who politely agreed, and yet never fulfilled his promise. Perhaps that parable needs reflection upon today, where 'nicespeak' has become paramount- so long as you say something nicely, what you actually are saying and what you *do* isn't so important. *How* we speak *is* of course important; but it can be exalted to the point where words rather than real action become paramount. But that aside, the point is that both the sons were *extremely* rude to their Father. And he was the most loving, self-sacrificial dad that two kids ever could've had. We feel hurt for the lovely old boy. And we sense something of his hurt, our heart starts to bleed for him, and we think of *our* Heavenly Father's hurt. And then the penny drops- those two boys are us.

The younger son was more than rude in demanding his actual share of the inheritance immediately. He was effectively wishing that his father was dead. He had the neck to treat his lovely father as if he were already dead. There arose in Europe after the second world war the 'Death of God' philosophy and theology. We may distance ourselves from it in disgust, finding even the words grating and inappropriate, but let's remember that the younger son ends up the son who is found in the end abiding in the Father's house and joyful fellowship. This is how *we* have treated our wonderful Father. We know from the examples of Abraham (Gen. 25:5-8) and Jacob (Gen. 48-49) that the actual division of the inheritance was made *by the father* as his death approached. For the son to take the initiative was disgusting. Although the sons could have some legal right to what their father gave them before his death, they were strictly denied the right of actually having it in possession [i.e. the right of disposition](1). This awful son was therefore each of us. And the father responds with an unreal grace. He agrees. He did what he surely knew was not really for the spiritual good of the son. And according to Dt. 21:7, the younger son's share was one third. But the father gives him *half*. The younger son turns it all into cash within a few days [the Greek for "gathered all" definitely means 'to turn into cash']. This would've meant selling the fields and property quickly- and the father would've had to give agreement for this and have been involved in the contracts. Buying and selling takes a long time in peasant culture- selling quickly would've meant selling very cheaply. It would've been the laughing stock of the whole area. The way the son sells the inheritance would've been a more awful and unreal thing in the ears of the Lord's first hearers than it is to us. Naboth would rather have died than sell his inheritance- even to the King (1 Kings 21:3). The lifetime's hard work of the father and family was wasted. And the father went along with it all. This was more than unusual; it would've been outrageous in the ears of the Lord's hearers. But this is the outrageous nature of God's grace. He must be so torn by our prayers- as a loving Father, wanting to give us what we ask for materially, whilst knowing it's not for our good... and sometimes doing so. The father made himself look a fool because of his enormous love for this obnoxious son who wished him dead, this young man who clearly thought solely in terms of 'Gimme the money and I'm outta here for good'. And he thought this with no thought to the huge damage he was bringing upon the rest of the family. For they would've lost so much through losing half the property. We sense the pain of the father, of the family, and the selfishness of the son. And time and again we are breathless at the love and grace of the father.

Significantly, the son asked for his share of the property- not his inheritance. To receive inheritance carried with it responsibility, of building the house of your father, upholding the family name etc. But this son didn't want that. And the father could quite rightly have said 'No, you get the inheritance when you take the responsibilities that come with it'. But no, this son wants to quit with his lovely father and the whole family name. In that culture, to cut your ties with your home family, your inheritance, your land... was almost unheard of. It was almost impossible to do. But that's what this angry young man wanted. The incredible thing is, the father allowed him to do this! That element of unreality signposts the extent to which God allows us freewill, genuine freedom of determination- and how much it costs Him emotionally and as a person to do so. This is the frightening thing about freewill- how much it hurts and costs God to give it to us. This insight alone should lead to a far more careful and responsible use of our freewill. William Temple said somewhere, something to the effect that God gives us freedom even to reject His love. It's no good reflecting on the younger son and thinking 'But I'm not that kinda guy'. The whole point of the parable is that yes, we are. That's us. We're either like that son, or the self-righteous son who is left standing outside of the father's fellowship. Clearly enough, the God whom Jesus was revealing was *not* based upon some village patriarch. Freud rightly observed that many people's image of God is

based upon their experience of human father figures. For the true believer however, the Lord Jesus is revealing a Father-figure radically different to anything they've ever met.

Our Desperation

We don't like to think of ourselves as that thankless young man; but even more do we revolt at the idea that we were and are at times out there feeding pigs. Anyone who's travelled in the Middle East will know the annoyance of a beggar attaching themselves to you and just refusing to leave you. But watch how the locals deal with those types. They don't shout at them, or chase them. They will ask them to do something which is beneath even their dignity as a beggar to do. And they walk away shamefaced. I knew a brother who was a schoolteacher. The boss wanted to fire him because of his Christianity. The boss didn't say 'You're fired! Clear off!'. He simply transferred him to a remote village in the middle of nowhere. And so the brother did the only reasonable thing- he resigned. The young man 'joining' or 'gluing' himself to the rich Gentile citizen was like the beggar who glues himself to you, and you don't know how to shake him off. The pig owner told him to go and feed his pigs- thinking that this would surely be beneath this once-wealthy Jew who was hassling him. But so desperate was the young man, that he had to swallow every drop of pride, national and personal- and go do it. And he felt like a pig- he was willing to eat what they ate. *This* is the picture of our desperation at every sin- but we need to feel it, if we are to experience the path back to the Father. In an age when sin is often more about the words you type on your keyboard than actual physical debauchery, this parable hits home hard. Of course it was pride which was in the way for the son, and it is swallowing pride which is the essence of repentance. And again, it was fear of shame that delayed the young man's return- fear of having to go through the *kezazah* ceremony of being officially disowned, fear of how the mob of young kids which roam every village street would whistle and shout and sing insults at him. And we need to pause and reflect whether we contribute to this significant barrier which surely hinders so many from returning to the Father's house.

But the young man hadn't quite learnt the lesson when he decided to return home. He decided to return and ask to be made "as one of your skilled craftsmen" (Lk. 15:19 Gk.- he uses *misthios* rather than *doulos*, the usual word for 'slave'). Presumably he figured that he could work and pay off what he had wasted. His plan was to use the phrase "I have sinned against heaven and against you" (Lk. 15:18)- but this is almost quoting verbatim from Pharaoh's words of insincere repentance in Ex. 10:16! He still failed to grasp that he was his father's *son*- he didn't 'get it', that *this* would be the basis of his salvation, rather than a master-servant relationship with his father based on hard work. It was the father's amazing grace which swept him off his feet just along the street from his father's home; it was the father's unconditional acceptance of him which made him realize what sonship and repentance was really all about.

The Older Son

To refuse a father's invitation to a family celebration was seen as totally unacceptable, rude, and a rejection of one's father. Hence the rudeness of the guests refusing the King's invitations. The older brother would usually have played a prominent role in such feasts. But this son refuses to attend. This would've struck the Lord's initial audience as incredibly rude. Remember how Vashti's refusal to attend her husband's feast resulted in her being rejected (Esther 1). What the older son did would've been seen as an insult to all the guests; and many fathers would simply have rejected and disowned their son for this, or at least, expressed

significant disapproval. Indeed, this was expected of him by society and the other guests. But yet again, the father humiliates himself and breaks all Jewish norms and expectations of correctness and decency. He leaves the feast! For the host to walk out was yet again seen as totally rude to the other guests- it of course echoes the shepherd leaving the 99 sheep and going off after the one lost sheep. The father doesn't go out and giving the arrogant, unloving, disobedient son a good talking to, as the audience would expect. Again, as so often, the Lord's parables set up an expectation- and then dash it. The father goes out into the darkness of the courtyard, and "entreats" his son (Lk. 15:28). The Greek *parakaleo* means literally to come alongside, as if the father is inviting the son to stand alongside him in his extension of grace. Perhaps Paul is making one of his many allusions to the Lord's parables when he uses the same word to speak of how he 'beseeches' his legalistic brethren (2 Cor. 5:20).

But all this grace is ignored by the elder son. He insults his father. It may not be so apparent to us, but it would've been picked up by the Lord's first hearers. A son should always address his father in this context with the term "O Father". But he doesn't. He speaks of his brother as "Your son" rather than his brother. He speaks of how the prodigal "devoured *your* living". And he speaks of how he has faithfully served his father *as a servant*- like his younger brother, he failed to perceive the wonder of *sonship*. His awful outburst is doing in essence what his younger brother had done some time before. He was saying that he didn't want a part in his father's family. The "living" or wealth of the family was no longer *his*. He wasn't going to respect his father as his father any more. He didn't want to be in the family, so he wouldn't go to the family reunion. That poor, dear father. And what is the father's response? He calls him his *teknon*, his dearly loved son. Notice how the more common *huios* is used for "son" throughout the story (Lk. 15:11,13,19,21,24,25,30). In the face of such awful rejection, he shows his special love. It's like the Lord giving "the sop", the sign of special love and favoritism, to Judas- as he betrays Him. There's a powerful lesson here for those of us who find ourselves irked and angered by legalistic, arrogant brethren who refuse to fellowship with the rest of us. There was no anger and irksomeness in the father's attitude. He was only deeply sorry, hurt, cut up... but he *so* loved that arrogant elder brother. He goes on to say that he gives that son all that he has. But he could only actually do that through being dead! The father is willing to die for that arrogant older brother, whose pride and anger stops him wanting anything to do with his father, whom he has just openly shamed and rejected. And the father wants to die for him. This is to be our attitude to the self-righteous, the divisive, those who reject their brethren.

But of course, there's a real and obvious warning not to be like the older brother. It worries me, it turns me, right in my very gut, when I see so many of our community refusing to fellowship with their brethren because 'He's in that ecclesia... they've had her back... she's divorced and remarried... he's never said sorry, his motives aren't right, she only said those words...'. And those attitudes are made out to be expressions of righteousness. It is not for me to judge anyone; I seek to love those who act like this with the love and grief of the father for the elder son. But they must be gently warned as to the implications of their position. By refusing to fellowship with the rest of the family, by making such a fuss about the return of the prodigals, they fail to realize that they are in essence doing what the prodigals have done; and they are de facto signing themselves out of the Father's family. The issues are that serious. The parable isn't just a story with a possible interpretation which we can shrug our shoulders at and get on with life. The Lord's teaching, His 'doctrine', was and is in these parables.

The lost son story finishes, as do the other stories, with a banquet of rejoicing- rejoicing in the father's love. But it's no accident that Luke 15 is preceded by the parable of Lk. 14:15-24, where we have another great banquet- symbolic of our communion in the future Kingdom of God. The connection is clear. We will "eat bread in the Kingdom of God" if we eat bread with the Lord in the banquets of this life. And yet *so, so often* it is said amongst us: 'I won't break bread there. They have X or Z... who is divorced... who's not repentant... they have Q from that fellowship attending there... I'm not going in there'. It is not for us to judge. And I do not do so in what I write here. But it is the fairly obvious teaching of the Lord here that if we won't eat bread with Him in joy now, if we won't celebrate His grace and love for the lost in this life, then we will not in the future banquet. His grace is likely large enough to cover even the self-righteous; but we need to realize the eternal gravity of our decisions and feelings about our brethren in this life. Especially must we come to see ourselves as the prodigal. If we plan on being in the Kingdom, we must identify ourselves with the prodigal, and not with the self-righteous elder son who is left outside of the Father's fellowship, because he placed himself there.

An Unreal Father

The father whom we meet in the lost son parable is prefigured by the shepherd and woman of the earlier parables. The three parables are described as one singular parable (Lk. 15:3).

Personal Passion

The man who owned 100 sheep was rich. Shepherds were the lowest of the low. If you owned 100 sheep, you employed a shepherd to look after them and take responsibility for chasing the lost. But there's something unreal- the owner of the sheep is the one who is the shepherd. This actually is the point of the Ezekiel 34 passage upon which the Lord built the parable- having fired the unworthy shepherds of Israel, "Thus saith the Lord God: Behold, *I myself, even I*, will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeketh out his flock in the day that he is among his sheep that are scattered abroad, so will I seek out my sheep; and I will deliver them ... I will bring them ... I will feed them ... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep" (Ez. 34:11-15). The remarkable thing is that the owner of the sheep decides to become the personal shepherd, feeding, seeking, delivering, bringing the sheep *himself personally*. A Palestinian wealthy enough to own a whole flock of sheep simply wouldn't do this. He *always* hired someone else to do this- because being a shepherd was so despised. Behold the humility of God. But see too His personal passion for us. Hence the Lord's question: Which one of *you* would act like this? The Father and His Son take such passionate personal responsibility for us, that God was willing in Christ to shame and humiliate Himself in order to get us back into the fold.

Personal Responsibility

There's also something odd about the way the Lord speaks of the shepherd: "*He* has lost one of them". Translations of the Bible into semitic languages, especially Arabic, tend to read: "If one of them is lost" (passive). In the language and concepts of the Middle East, a speaker never blames himself. As in Spanish, they would not say "I lost my book"- rather, "the book went from me". Likewise "I missed the train" is expressed as "the train left me". And I would even speculate that preaching Christ in Arabic and even Hispanic cultures comes up against the problem of people strongly disliking taking ultimate responsibility, or to own up to the personal guilt of sin; the shifting of blame away from oneself is reflected even in their

languages. And so when the Lord puts words in the shepherd's mouth whereby he takes direct responsibility for the loss of the sheep, this would've sounded strange even grammatically. Apparently to this day, it's hard to translate that actual phrase into Arabic. Likewise with the idea of the woman saying that she had found the coin which she had lost. The Lord is labouring how God, and God in Christ, feel an extraordinary personal responsibility for the lost.

If we imagine the woman who lost the coin, we sense something of her remorse and desperation as she searches the cracks in the floor for it. It could've been part of her dowry- all that she owned for herself, all that was her very own. Not even her body was hers- it was her husband's, to do what he wished with. But the dowry coins were hers- her very own. If the allusion were to one of these coins, it would speak of how much we mean to the Lord... that I, one of 6 billion, actually mean everything to Him, for whom I am His very own. But the allusion may also be to coins which the peasant women would keep bound up in a rag, close to their body. With this money, the woman would've had to feed the family for the next week or so. But... she'd let the rag come loose, and a coin had slipped out. In either case, we are to imagine the woman searching for it with a sense of remorse, taking responsibility that she was accountable for the loss. And this, we are invited to understand, is how the Lord feels for those who are lost. Notice how the woman searches *in the house*- presumably, she'd not been out of the house since she last had the coin. By filling out this little detail, we perhaps have a picture of how the Lord took responsibility, or felt responsible, for the loss of those 'within the house' of Israel.

The Joy Of The Lord

Hence the joy of the shepherd when the sheep is found- he lays it on his shoulders *rejoicing*. To carry a sheep on your shoulders, fighting and struggling with you, as you climb down a mountainside in the dark... isn't something which is usually done *rejoicing*. But this is the unusual, humanly inexplicable, *joy* which there is in the Father and Son when day by day they 'find' us and bring us back. And where would a shepherd usually take such a lost animal? Back to the flock, whom he's left in the wilderness. But then comes another unreal element. The shepherd takes the sheep *home to his very own house*. This sheep had such extraordinary value to this wealthy man. He came back dirty and exhausted- he humiliated himself and made himself a fool in the eyes of the world, all because of this humanly senseless love and joy which he had over this lost sheep. And we have to fill in the details, answering the unasked but implied questions- what about the 99 left out in the wilderness? The story ends with them out of the house- paving the way for how the elder son is left standing outside of the house. Note how Lk. 15:3 speaks of the three parables as one, in the singular, "parable".

The Lord's Grace

The shepherd-owner calls his "friends" together. This surely refers to the clubs the Pharisees formed in villages, called the *Khaburim* ['friends']. They ought to have rejoiced to be eating with sinners, as the Lord was- but they wouldn't. The whole context of the three parables is the Lord justifying why he ate at home with sinners, thereby showing that He considered them as somehow 'in fellowship' with Him. The Pharisees wouldn't do this unless those people repented and learnt Torah in great depth. But the Lord is surely saying that He sees those men who ate with Him as the sheep which has already been brought home. He reflected the gracious outlook with which He saw people; and His hopefulness that by treating a person

as if they had ‘come home’, then they would indeed do so. Probing this line further, the Lord Jesus speaks of the found sheep as being symbolic of the repentant. But the sheep did nothing- it was simply acceptant of having been found. To accept being found is, therefore, seen by the Lord as what He calls ‘repentance’. Now surely that’s grace- salvation without works.

Radical Acceptance

There was a Jewish custom called *Kezazah*, ‘the cutting off’. If a Jew lost the family fortune amongst Gentiles, he would be greeted at home by the whole family, who would break a pot and scream ‘XYZ is cut off from his people’(2). The family and community would have no more fellowship with the person(3). Moulton and Milligan describe the record of a public notice by which parents declare their dissociation from their son who had wasted their wealth(4). This is what the Lord’s Jewish audience would’ve expected to come next in the story, when the son returns. But no! There is the very opposite. Law and traditional expectation and even human perception of justice is thrown away, as the father races along the street towards his son and accepts him. For an elderly man to run publicly was yet again an unreal element in the story- mature men always walk, at a slow and dignified pace. Not gather up their robes and run, let alone publicly. Actually the Greek word translated “run” in Lk. 15:20 is that used about sprinting (1 Cor. 9:24,26; Gal. 2:2; 5:7; 2 Thess. 3:1; Heb. 12:1). Here again we see the self-humiliation of the father before men, as he expressed a radical acceptance. Even we from our distance expect there to be a ‘telling off’, a facing of the issues. But there isn’t. The grace of God which meets the returning sinner leads him to repentance. It of itself, by its sheer magnitude, elicits the state of contrition which is indeed vital; but this is inspired by the huge initiative of the Father and Son.

The father’s radical acceptance is the very basis of our salvation. It is challenging, supremely so. Perhaps we handle ‘classic’ repentance easier- someone does wrong, goes off for a long time, is out of sight and out of mind, comes back, asks for our forgiveness with tears and humility. It’s actually psychologically hard to say ‘No’. *That* kind of forgiveness is relatively easy. But what is so much harder is to show forgiveness and the nature of the father’s love and grace time and again in daily life; to keep looking and hoping for the one who has offended us, ruined us, destroyed us, used and abused us... to be coming home. Actually I know virtually none amongst us who rise up to the father’s love and grace in this. It remains a stark, sobering challenge to us all.

It needs to be understood that the father had to act as the village expected him to. They expected him to enact the *kezazah*, to hand the son over to them in some form for judgment, to make an example of this awful man. No village member is an island, all have to act within the expectations of the group. But the father breaks through all that. He again humiliates himself before the villagers by doing what he did. He likely angers them- for anger so often comes as a result of being confronted by the grace shown by others. We see it so often in the life of our spiritual community. Indeed, the Lord got at this in another parable, where He speaks of how some were angry at the extreme grace shown by the generous vineyard owner (Mt. 20:1-16).

The honour bestowed upon the son by the father is totally unreal. Without the slightest sign that the son is now responsible, is truly repentant, has the right motives... the father gives him the best robe, which is what was done for the person whom a leader wished to honour above all (Esther 6:1-9). And the father gives the son his signet ring (cp. Gen. 41:41,42). All

this, before the prodigal has in any way proved himself. All he's done is come home, still not wanting to be a son, just a craftsman; and he was only driven home by his desperation. Such is the huge significance attached by the Lord to our turning up home. And in our dealing with returning sinners, which is every one of us day by day, we should reflect the same attitude.

We are left, as so often, to imagine how the story finished. How hard it would've been for the younger son to live with the older brother! And one day, dear, darling dad would've died. The younger son would've had *his* sons, been called upon to uphold the family honour, make decisions in the village. We are left to imagine how his experience of grace would've made him judge differently to all others.

A Window Onto The Cross

Who does the father represent? The context for the three stories is the Lord Jesus justifying his eating with sinners. The fact that the father had received the sinful younger brother is phrased in the same way as the Pharisees' complaint about the Lord Jesus receiving sinners (Lk. 15:2 = Lk. 15:27). And each of the stories involve a closing scene featuring a joyful meal of celebration. The father would appear therefore to refer to Jesus; and yet clearly enough we are intended to see the father as also our Heavenly Father. As you likely know, I don't go for the primitive equation 'Jesus = God'. I'm not a Trinitarian. So I take this to be an exemplification of how "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their iniquities unto them" (2 Cor. 5:19). Notice in how many ways the father humiliates himself before everyone, and breaks all traditional Jewish expectations to do so. He gives the younger son what he asks, and more than the Law allowed; he runs to meet the son; he accepts the son; he leaves the banquet where he is the host in order to plead with his older son; he doesn't discipline either of his sons as expected. He makes a fool of himself time and again, upsetting Jewish rules and norms. And the younger son pestering the father to divide up the inheritance may indicate that the father was about to die. Likewise, when the father says to the older son that he gives him there and then all that is his... this is language only really appropriate if the father is about to die, or has actually died. Does not all this speak of the cross as the basis for the Father's love, grace and acceptance? That there, God was in Christ to reconcile us to Himself, not imputing sin to us... there the Father was humiliated in Christ, made a fool of, ridiculed. The Almighty God came this low... to the public shame and death of the cross. The suffering of God in the cross was all about rejected and unaccepted love; and so it is to this day.

Notes

- (1) Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables Of Jesus* (New York: Scribners, 1963) p. 128.
- (2) Kenneth E. Bailey, *The Cross And The Prodigal* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2005) p. 52.
- (3) Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jacob And The Prodigal* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003) p. 102.
- (4) J.H. Moulton & G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary Of The Greek New Testament Illustrated From the Papyri And Other Non-Literary Sources* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952) p. 89.

Jacob, Esau And The Prodigal

The parable of the prodigal contains multiple allusions to the record of Jacob and Esau, their estrangement, and the anger of the older brother [Esau] against the younger brother (1). There is a younger and an elder son, who both break their relationships with their father, and have an argument over the inheritance issue. Jacob like the prodigal son insults his father in order to get his inheritance. As Jacob joined himself to Laban in the far country, leaving his older brother Esau living at home, so the prodigal glued himself to a Gentile and worked for him by minding his flocks, whilst his older brother remained at home with the father. The fear of the prodigal as he returned home matches that of Jacob as he finally prepares to meet the angry Esau. Jacob's unexpected meeting with the Angel and clinging to him physically is matched by the prodigal being embraced and hugged by his father. Notice how Gen. 33:10 records how Jacob felt he saw the face of Esau as the face of an Angel. By being given the ring, the prodigal "has in effect now supplanted his older brother" (2); just as Jacob did. As Esau was "in the field" (Gen. 27:5), so was the older brother.

What was the Lord Jesus getting at by framing His story in terms of Jacob and Esau? The Jews saw Jacob as an unblemished hero, and Esau / Edom as the epitome of wickedness and all that was anti-Jewish and anti-God. The Book of Jubilees has much to say about all this, as does the Genesis Rabbah (3). The Lord is radically and bravely re-interpreting all this. Jacob is the younger son, who went seriously wrong during his time with Laban. We have shown elsewhere how weak Jacob was at that time. Jacob was saved by grace, the grace shown in the end by the Angel with whom he wrestled, and yet who finally blessed him. As Hos. 12:4 had made clear, Jacob weeping in the Angel's arms and receiving the blessing of gracious forgiveness is all God speaking to us. The older brother who refused to eat with his sinful brother clearly represented, in the context of the parable, the Jewish religious leaders. They were equated with Esau- the very epitome of all that was anti-Jewish. And in any case, according to the parable, the hero of the story is the younger son, Jacob, who is extremely abusive and unspiritual towards his loving father, and is saved by sheer grace alone. This too was a radical challenge to the Jewish perception of their ancestral father Jacob.

The parable demonstrates that both the sons despised their father and their inheritance in the same way. They both wish him dead, treat him as if he isn't their father, abuse his gracious love, shame him to the world. Both finally come to their father from working in the fields. Jacob, the younger son, told Laban that "All these years I have served you... and you have not treated me justly" (Gen. 31:36-42). But these are exactly the words of the older son in the parable! The confusion is surely to demonstrate that both younger and elder son essentially held the same wrong attitudes. And the Father, clearly representing God, and God as He was manifested in Christ, sought so earnestly to reconcile both the younger and elder sons. The Lord Jesus so wished the hypocritical Scribes and Pharisees to fellowship with the repenting sinners that He wept over Jerusalem; He didn't shrug them off as self-righteous bigots, as we tend to do with such people. He wept for them, as the Father so passionately pours out His love to them. And perhaps on another level we see in all this the desperate desire of the Father and Son for Jewish-Arab unity in Christ. For the promises to Ishmael show that although Messiah's line was to come through Isaac, God still has an especial interest in and love for all the children of Abraham- and that includes the Arabs. Only a joint recognition of the Father's grace will bring about Jewish-Arab unity. But in the end, it will happen- for there will be a highway from Assyria to Judah to Egypt in the Millennium. The anger of the elder brother was because the younger son had been reconciled to the Father without compensating for what he had done wrong. It's the same anger at God's grace which is shown by the workers who objected to those who had worked less receiving the same pay. And it's the

same anger which is shown every time a believer storms out of an ecclesia because some sinner has been accepted back...

Notes

- (1) K.E. Bailey, *Jacob And The Prodigal* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003) lists 51 points of contact between the Jacob / Esau record and the prodigal parable.
- (2) A.J. Hultgren, *The Parables Of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) p. 79.
- (3) See e.g. Jacob Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary To The Book Of Genesis* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985) Vol. 3 p. 176.

3-15 The Good Samaritan

Salvation in prospect

We've read how the lawyer asked Jesus what he should do " to inherit eternal life" (Lk.10:25), and in a sense we ask the same question. But we mustn't be quite like him, in thinking that if we physically *do* certain things, then we will at some future point be given eternal life as a kind of payment; and nor should we think that the eternity of the Kingdom life is the most important aspect of our salvation. Let's look over to Lk.18:18, where " A certain ruler asked him" the very same question: What he should do to inherit eternal life. Christ's response was that if he kept the commandments in the right spirit, he would " have treasure in heaven" . When the man found this impossible, Christ commented how hard it was for the rich to " enter into the kingdom of God" (Lk.18:24). So there is a parallel here between inheriting eternal life, having treasure in heaven, and entering the Kingdom. We are told that now is the time, in this life, for us to lay up treasure in Heaven (Mt.6:20). So here and now it is possible to have treasure in Heaven, to have eternal life in prospect. In a sense we now have eternal life (1 Jn.5:11,13), in a sense we are now in the process of entering into the Kingdom . We have been translated, here and now, into the Kingdom (Col.1:13). The very same Greek construction used in Col.1:13 occurs in Acts 14:22, where Paul says that through much tribulation we enter into the Kingdom; in other words, entry into the Kingdom is an ongoing process, and we experience this on account of the effect of our trials. Entering the Kingdom is used to describe our response to the Gospel in Lk.16:16: " The kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it" . Unless we receive the Gospel of the kingdom as a child, we will not enter it; i.e. respond fully to that Gospel (Lk.18:17).

In prospect we have been saved, we are now in Christ, and therefore the great salvation which he was given is therefore counted to all those who are in him. We shy away from the positive promises that we really can start to enter the Kingdom now, that we do now have eternal life in prospect. But this shying away is surely an indication of our lack of faith; our desperate unwillingness to believe so fully and deeply that our salvation really is so wonderfully assured (1). That eternal life dwells in us insofar as the eternal spirit of Christ is in us (2). And so as we face up to the sureness of these promises, we earnestly want to know what we must *do* to inherit this eternal life, to have this great treasure of assured salvation laid up for us now in Heaven. Of course we are saved by our faith, not our works (Tit.3:5-7); yet our faith, if it is real, will inevitably be shown in practical ways. So with all this in mind, we can

come down to that parable of the good Samaritan. That parable is the Lord's answer to this vital question.

The preface to the good Samaritan parable is there in v.27: " Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind: and thy neighbour as thyself...*this do, and thou shalt live* (eternally) " (Lk.10:27,28). To define this statement more closely, Christ told the good Samaritan parable. He concludes it by saying: " Go and *do* thou likewise" (Lk.10:37); he is referring back to v.28, where Christ commands the man " *this do* " , i.e. loving God with all the heart, soul etc. So the example of the good Samaritan is a practical epitome of loving God with all the heart, soul etc. To love our neighbour as ourself is to love God with all the heart and soul and strength and mind. Therefore the good Samaritan needs to represent us.

Samaritan Saviour

And yet when we analyze this good Samaritan parable, it becomes clear that we are also aptly represented by the wounded man; it is the Lord Jesus who is the good Samaritan. The Law of Moses, symbolized by the priest and Levite, came near to man's stricken condition, and had a close look at it. Lk.10:32 (Young's Literal) brings this out: " Having been about the place, having come and seen..." , the Levite passed on by. The Jews regarded Christ as a Samaritan, so they would have immediately understood the Samaritan of the parable to represent Jesus (Jn.8:48). The good Samaritan having compassion on the man and being moved to do something about him has echoes of the Lord's compassion on the multitudes (v.33). His promise to come again after two days (he gave two pence, and a penny a day was a fair rate, Mt.20:2) is a clear connection with the Lord's promise to come again (after 2000 years from his departure?).

Until the good Samaritan's return, the man was kept in the inn, with everything that was needed lavishly provided. Surely the inn is symbolic of the ecclesia (3); in the ecclesia there should be a common sense of spiritual improvement, of growing in health, of remembering our extraordinary deliverance, realizing our weakness, looking forward to seeing the Samaritan again to praise him for the wonder of it all. This ought to characterize our gathering this morning, not just *partially* , but very very fully .

He " bound up his wounds" , alluding to the manner in which Christ was to bind up the broken hearted (Is.61:1). He cured those mental wounds by pouring in oil and wine, symbols of his word and his blood respectively. So the brutal beating up of that man, leaving him half dead, refers to the broken-heartedness which the sin of this world and our own natures inflicts upon us. Picture the scene on that Jericho road, the body covered in blood and dust, massive bruises swelling up, flies buzzing around on the congealed blood, face in the dust, frightened donkey neighing among the scrub somewhere. That is they very picture of our broken heartedness, the broken heartedness which Christ came to heal. The physical grossness of those wounds is a picture of our mental state. Yet the flesh deceives us that there is nothing really that wrong with our minds, with our natures. Yet there *is* , and we need to come to terms with it more and more completely, to realize our deep mental need for Christ's healing. Once we do this, we will be able to see the need, the urgent need, for his healing of our *minds* through his spirit, his perfect, clean mind, being in us. And how were those wounds healed? How are our mental wounds healed? By the Son of God tearing up his own garments to bandage up the wounds (how else did he do it?), and healing us with his blood and his word.

The description of the stricken man being "stripped" of his clothing uses the very same word, rarely used in the NT, to describe the 'stripping' of the Lord Jesus at the time of His death (Mt. 27:28,21; Mk. 15:20). Likewise the robbers 'left him' (Lk. 10:30), in the same as the Lord was 'left' alone by the disciples to face the end alone (Mk. 14:50 s.w.). The robbers "wounded him" (Lk. 10:30), a phrase which translates two Greek words, 'to lay upon' and 'stripes'. The cross was 'laid upon' Jesus (Lk. 23:26 s.w.); and we are familiar with the idea of the Lord being 'wounded' and receiving 'stripes' in His final sufferings (Is. 53:5). The connection is surely that in the process of His death, the Lord came to know the feelings of the stripped and stricken people whom He came to save. No wonder He can powerfully "have compassion" upon us. And it's been pointed out elsewhere that the 'two pennies' paid by the Samaritan are the equivalent of the half shekel atonement money under the Mosaic Law, whereby a man could be redeemed. Our redeemer is of course the Lord Jesus. The redemption was 'paid' in His blood- which implies His putting us on *His* beast of burden and carrying us to the inn, where He paid the money, is a picture of His final sufferings which lead up to the actual shedding of His blood.

"He brought him to the inn" can also be translated "He led it [the donkey] to the inn". In this case, the Samaritan is acting as a servant, for it is the master who rides on the donkey and the servant who walks on foot, leading it there. Remember how Haman has to lead the horse on which Mordecai rides (Esther 6:7-11). All this speaks of how the Lord took upon Himself the form of a servant in order to lead us to salvation- when at the time we could do nothing, and had no awareness of the huge grace being shown to us. The Samaritan was of course making himself vulnerable to attack by robbers by doing this. But think through it some more. There was an eye-for-eye vengeance syndrome alive and well at that time. If a Samaritan turned up with a wounded Jew, it would look for all the world like *he* was responsible for the damage. It would be the first time a Samaritan was known to have done such an act of kindness. And he risks himself all the more, by staying at the inn, leaving, and then returning there, thus willing to face the inevitable suspicion that *he* had attacked the man, or was somehow involved in the incident. This risking of His own salvation was what the cross was all about. The parable gives a rare window into the Lord's self-perception on this point. And so for us- we may stay up all night serving someone's need, only to make ourselves irritable and impatient and more prone to sin ourselves the next day. And in any case, it's my experience that no good deed goes unpunished; we have to pay various prices for it in this life. In all these things we are living out the spirit of the Samaritan saviour.

"Do likewise..."

So there's ample evidence that the despised Samaritan of this parable refers to the Lord Jesus. He was 'neighbour' to stricken humanity, he came near to us, binding up our broken hearts, and carried us to the haven of the ecclesia. "Go thou and do likewise" is therefore a real challenge to us: to have the same dedication for others' salvation as Christ had. His zeal to achieve God's plan of redemption should be ours. Remember how the good Samaritan parable is an exposition of how to love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind (v.27). Every fibre of the Lord's mind and body was bent *for us*, for bringing about God's plan of redemption. He loved us, his neighbour, as himself. Because of this it is impossible to separate Christ from the work He came to do, i.e. our redemption (4). The point of the good Samaritan parable is to teach us that his same devotion to the work of conquering sin should be seen in us; our concern for the salvation of others should be as great as that for our own. We need to be totally filled with the idea of bringing about God's glory, of seeing the conquest of sin achieved through Christ. So all our strength, our mind, will be given over to

the conquest of sin in ourselves, to the spreading of the Gospel to others, and to the binding up of the broken hearts of our brethren.

One of the many Old Testament quarries for this good Samaritan parable is found in 2 Chron.28:15 (5). Here we read how Israel attacked Judah whilst Judah were apostate, and took them captives. But then they realized their own shortcomings, and the fact that Judah really were their brethren; then they " clothed all that were naked among (he captives taken from Judah), and arrayed them, and shod them, and gave them to eat and to drink, and anointed them, and carried all the feeble of them upon asses, and brought them to Jericho...to their brethren" . Now there is allusion after allusion to this scene in the Samaritan parable. Surely our Lord had his eye on this incident as he devised that parable. The point he was making as surely this: 'In trying to follow my example of total love for your brethren, your spiritual neighbours, remember your own shortcomings, and what the Lord has done for you by His grace; and then go and reflect this to your brethren'.

The opportunities in our days for expressing this love of our brethren, with all our mind and strength, are just so numerous. Letter writing, preaching, organizing meetings, visits, above all fervent prayer for their salvation. If we are really pouring out all our heart and soul into the salvation of our brethren, after the pattern of Christ on the cross, our worldly careers will mean so little, our every practical decision will be coloured by our commitments to the body of Christ; where and how we live, what hours we work, hobbies (if any!), holidays (if any!)... our very soul, every aspect of our life, must be affected by our loving our neighbour, and thereby our God, with our whole soul and mind and physical strength.

As we behold the agony of our Lord Jesus, we really see our example. We see a man driven to the physical limits of his humanity, not in striving to achieve salvation by works, but in ministering God's wondrous grace to others. 'Gethsemane, can we forget?' we sing, as if it was so unthinkable that we should. But of course we do, hour by hour, day by day even. We really need to seriously get down to remembering his agony, the intensity of his struggle, more frequently and more deeply. This is surely what we need exhortation about. We are bound together by the fact that we all fail to do this as we should. I tend to visualize him with stooping shoulders, graying hair, hair line well receded, lined forehead reflecting that tremendous mental torture he experienced, quietly spoken, and with eyes which spoke a message of commitment which we have never seen in any other. Of course, we don't know exactly, neither is it ultimately significant. But if we *love* the Lord Jesus, if we truly have a *relationship* with him, if we really focus on his example of sacrifice on the cross, that sacrifice of body and mind which went on throughout his life, then surely it's inevitable that we start to think of him physically, as a friend, a reality, a glorious example. So I've opened my heart to you there, that's how I see him in his life and in his agony, as the moonlight reveals him to us, kneeling in Gethsemane.

Total empathy

But outside the reverie, we are walking on down that Jericho road, Christ's example really is ours. " Be going on, and do likewise" Christ concluded (v.37 YLT). Verse 38 appropriately continues: " Now it came to pass, *as they went* " , in the same way as the Samaritan Saviour " as he journeyed" (v.33) showed such energetic compassion , with all his heart and strength, to the stricken man. We must be able to use our own realization of our own desperate need for Christ's grace to motivate us to zealously devote ourselves to ministering to others. Our lack of zeal in this is largely due to our own failure to appreciate our own need, and the

degree to which this has been satisfied by Christ. Christ knew (and knows) the feelings of the stricken man. As the man was stripped and wounded, so identical language is used about the sufferings of Christ on the cross (Mt.27:28,29; Lk.20:12; Zech.13:6). As his would-be neighbours passed him by on the other side, so the neighbours of Christ stood aloof from his stricken body on the cross (Ps.38:11 AVmg.). Through this he can fully enter into our broken hearts, into our intense spiritual loneliness without him (if only we would realize it) and therefore he will come alongside us with a heart of true compassion. So because of his sufferings which we now behold, he can so truly, so truly and exactly, empathize with our spiritual state.

So here we are as it were in the inn, thinking back to our salvation by that suffering Samaritan, the strangeness and yet the glorious *wonder* of it all. I'm sure Christ meant us to fill in the unspoken details in his parable. Of course the saved man would have re-lived time and again his wondrous salvation, how he had come to with the eyes of that man peering earnestly into his, the laying on the ass, and the slow journey to the inn. As Israel remembered their Passover deliverance through the Passover feast, so we lie here on our sickbed in the inn, as it were, and remember our great salvation.

All Of Us

The wounded man is all of us- "a certain man" (Lk. 10:30) is a phrase more usually translated 'any man', 'whomsoever' etc. The idea of journeying downwards from Jerusalem to Jericho has some definite OT connections, not least with wicked King Zedekiah, who ignored repeated prophetic pleas to repent and fled from Jerusalem to Jericho, only to be overtaken on the way by the Babylonians and sent to Babylon to condemnation (2 Kings 25:4). 'You're every one a Zedekiah', is the implication- but we've been saved from out of that condemnation by the Samaritan's grace. Another allusion is to the incident in 2 Chron. 28:15, where the captured enemies of Israel are marched from Jerusalem to Jericho, and yet by grace they are given clothes, food and water. In all these allusions, Jesus is radically reversing all the roles. The true people of God are the repentant enemies of the people of God, the "thieves" who spoil the people of God are the Jewish elders (Hos. 6:1,29), the Divine Saviour is not a Jew but a Samaritan etc.

The helplessness of the injured man is a fine picture of our weakness. We can only accept salvation; there is nothing we can *do* to earn it. Hence the Lord warned those who *seek* to *save* their own lives (Lk. 17:33)- He uses the same two words to explain how *He* is the one who seeks and saves (Lk. 19:10). Acceptance of salvation is perhaps what faith is all about in its barest essence.

It's easy to think that the focus of the parable is upon being like the good Samaritan; but the focus equally is upon seeing ourselves in the wounded man. The Lord's answers to questions nearly always seem to provide a simple answer to them, and yet more subtly turn them upon their head, and redefine the terms. The parable was told in response to the question "What shall I *do* to inherit eternal life?". One answer appears to be: 'Recognize you're the injured man. Accept the Good Samaritan's salvation; for the Law which you so love can't save you'. Indeed if read the other way around, the Lord's answer would appear to be 'If you want eternal life, you must *do* lots of good works, after the pattern of the good Samaritan'. But this would contradict the whole message of salvation by pure grace which was central to the Lord's teaching. It seems to me that the parable is often interpreted that way- and it's actually

the very opposite of how the Lord wished us to read it. No matter how much good we *do* to people along the way, this cannot give us the life eternal.

Who is my neighbour?

The Samaritan parable appears to be an example of the way the Lord left His parables open to multiple interpretations and reflections, all of which express aspects of the many truths He was expressing to us. We need to reflect who the 'neighbour' actually is. The parable is told in extension of the Lord's approval of the statement that to love God is to love our neighbour, and vice versa (Lk. 10:27). The Lord was explaining that what we have to 'do' to get eternal life is to perceive that *God* is our neighbour. This is and was a challenging idea. As challenging and provocative as when a black sister in southern USA said to me once 'Ya know, God's ma nigger'. She meant, 'God's my buddy, my close one'. The turning point of the parable is in its end stress [as so often in these stories of the Lord]: "Which of these three... was neighbour unto him that fell among thieves?" (Lk. 10:36). Obviously, the neighbour was the Samaritan, whom we have shown to be symbolic of God and His Son. *This* is the answer to the question of the lawyer: 'And who is my neighbour?'. Answer: God / Jesus. The lawyer was wondering to whom he should do his good deeds. So he asks 'Who is my neighbour?'. He misunderstood the whole thing, as people do today. The Lord was turning the question around. Who is your neighbour? God / Jesus is your neighbour. You are lying there stricken. Your fellow lawyers and legalists / Priests / Levites can't help you. To receive eternal life, you must let God be your neighbour. *This* is the work of God, to believe on the one whom He sent (Jn. 6:29). This was the Lord's response to a similar question about what good works ought to be done. And the Samaritans were despised and rejected... yet the Lord chose them as a symbol of Himself. It's easy to under-estimate just how much the Jews despised Samaritans- "The Samaritans were publically cursed in the synagogues; and a petition was daily offered up praying God that the Samaritans might not be partakers of eternal life"(6). We see the sheer bravery of the Lord in framing the parable as He did. He doesn't chose to speak of a good Jew helping a stricken Samaritan; it's the other way around. The watchful student will find up to 12 allusions in the Good Samaritan parable back to Hosea 6:1-10- which portray the Jews as the robbers, and God as the Samaritan saviour. It is none less than Yahweh Himself who "will bind us up... revive us... raise us up... come to us"- all the very things which the Samaritan did. In all this was a huge challenge to the Lord's audience- as to whether they would accept His grace. "Oil and wine are forbidden objects if they emanate from a Samaritan"(7)- hence the challenge to the Jews in accepting the Lord's teaching. We in our turn struggle with the extent and purity of His grace.

But of course, we are intended to be the Good Samaritan too- in that we are to manifest and replicate the saving work of Jesus in our lives and in our interactions with people. There are details in the parables that need to be thought about, the story reconstructed. The Samaritan 'happened' to have "oil and wine" with him, i.e. medicaments for a wounded man (the wine would have been an antiseptic). And he was travelling alone, when people usually travelled in convoys. And the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans, they wouldn't even talk with them on the street (Jn. 4:9). So perhaps the Lord intended us to figure that the Samaritan was actually going to help one of his fellow Samaritans who needed attention, but on the way, he met one of another race in even greater need, and changed his plans in order to save him. In all this we have an exquisite example of the self-revelation of Jesus in His own parables- for He saw Himself as the Samaritan. And for us too, the call to save often comes when we are on our way to do something else, at the most inconvenient moment, to people we would never have considered would need nor accept our help towards salvation.

Notes

(1) See " The Problem Of Certainty" in *Beyond Bible Basics* for a discussion of this.

(2) See " The Promise Of The Spirit" .

(3) But in this case, who is the inn-keeper? Ecclesial eldership? The 'Comforter' Angel which super-intends the body of Christ? Or just an irrelevant part of the story? All of these solutions have their problems!

(4) This is a point frequently made by Robert Roberts in his debate with J.J.Andrew and in his book *The Blood Of Christ* .

(5) Another will be found in Hos. 6:1,2,9, which seems to equate the Jewish priesthood with the thieves which attacked the man. This was also Christ's estimation of them (Mt.21:13; Jn.10:1). This allusion would have been especially relevant in the first century context. Another connection will be found in 2 Kings 25:4.

(6) W.O.E. Oesterley, *The Gospel Parables In The Light Of Their Jewish Background* (London: SPCK, 1936) p. 102.

(7) J.D.M. Derrett, *Law In The New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1970) p. 220.

3-16 The Jesus Who Understands Weakness

" He hath not dealt with us after our sins...He knoweth our frame, he remembereth that we are dust" (Ps. 103:10,14) was surely true on account of the future sacrifice of the Saviour. The Christ was a demanding Lord, His expectations were (and are) high. And yet His parables reveal an immense sympathy and empathy with our weakness. In a normal human situation, it would be difficult to build a relationship with someone who had such apparently contradictory trends in His character. Perhaps we have the same problem in our struggle to know the Lord. He never denied that He came over in some ways as " a hard man" with high expectations; all He said was that seeing this was the case, we ought to act accordingly (Mt. 25:24) [\(1\)](#). And yet He is also a man of grace and understanding far beyond anything reached by anyone else. He is truly the Jesus who understands human weakness. And note that He is described even now as "the man Christ Jesus", able to feel the pulse of our humanity. This, in passing, opens a window into what Divine nature will be like: we will be able to completely feel the human experience, to the extent of still bearing the title 'men' even in immortality. On this account we will be able to relate to the mortals in the Millennium.

The Lord's parables describe those He will save as the son who refused to go to work, but later went, sheepishly aware of his failure; the sheep that went away, i.e. those Christ came to save (Mt. 18:11) (a symbol of us all, Mt. 18:12 cp. Is. 53:6); the lost coin; the son who went away and sowed his wild oats, and then returned with his tail between his legs [\(2\)](#). Christ expects that we will fail, as grievously as those parables indicate. Yet we have somehow come to think that they refer either to our follies before baptism, or to those within our

community who publicly disgrace themselves. Yet they describe *all* the faithful. But is there that sense of contrition in us, really? Aren't we more like the elder brother, or the son who said " I go, Sir, but went not" (Mt. 21:30)?

Different Levels

There is the suggestion in the parable of the labourers that the Lord makes some big concessions to human weakness. The Spirit in Paul points the contrast between realizing that salvation is by pure grace, and the wrong perception of salvation as a wage paid for works (e.g. Rom. 6). Indeed, the whole spirit of the Bible is that we should be willing to serve for nothing. The parable of the slave preparing his Master's meal after working hard for him a whole day makes this point. And yet in the parable of the labourers, Christ *agrees* with the labourers for a penny (note his humility, cp. God reasoning with men to accept His forgiveness, Is. 1:18); He asks them to go to work, and then He will give them the wages (cp. salvation). He even describes their salvation as " that which is right" , so much did He present the Gospel to them from the selfish level they were then on. The Lord was not ignorant of the line of argument Paul would later present regarding salvation by pure grace. Surely the parable is teaching that the Lord recognizes that in our spiritual immaturity at the time of our conversion, we do need the Kingdom as a carrot, as a motivator. He treats us on this low level initially, hoping we will rise up the higher level of grace. It is possible to witness this spiritual growth in converts, and also in the community of true believers over time; initially we are motivated by the reward of the political Kingdom, but as spiritual perception increases, we grasp Paul's gospel of pure grace. The concept of working and being rewarded decreases, and the recognition of salvation by grace increases, with the resultant zeal for a truer spirituality.

The parable of the unjust steward must be read in the context of the preceding parables of forgiveness. The man is in debt to his Master, surely speaking of our sinfulness (Lk. 16:3,4 cp. Mt. 18:24). He has wasted his goods- which are given to us at baptism (Lk. 16:1 cp. Mt. 25:14). He *could have* begged, but he was too proud. Therefore *in order to get forgiveness* he raced round forgiving everybody else. This suggests a spiritual selfishness which surely isn't ideal. And yet " the Lord commended the unjust steward" .

The Lord's offer of different levels is possibly seen in Mt. 19:12: " Him that is able to receive it, let him receive it" . But in terms of the parables, consider how the parable of the lost sheep shows Christ never giving up; but then there is the teaching of v. 15-18 concerning us trying to gain the brother that has offended us (Mt. 18:15 = Prov. 18:19), resulting in finally throwing him out of the church if we fail to reach an understanding with him. The teaching here seems to be that it is legitimate in such a case of personal offence to give up with the brother and disfellowship him. But the preceding parable shows Christ saying that He never gives up. And then in Mt. 18:22 Christ tells Peter (" I say unto *thee*" , singular) never to stop forgiving his brother in a case of personal offence, up to 70 times seven. My summary of all this is that the ideal standard is never to give up in trying to regain our brother; but it is possible to live on the level of 'taking up' every issue with him, and eventually disfellowshipping him. 'But', the Lord continued, 'For you Peter, I expect a higher level; constant forgiveness of your brother, all day long!'

Recognition Of Weakness

The labourers parable indicates that the Lord's desire for response to the Gospel will increase as the coming of the Kingdom advances. Apparently He increasingly is the Jesus who understands human weakness. There is an element of unreality in the parable; the servant goes at the 11th hour and hires the men who others had refused, presumably because they didn't look strong enough for the work. This element of unreality serves to highlight the (humanly) irrational zeal of the Lord for the spread of the Gospel in the last days before His return.

The parable of the marriage supper explains why this is. We need to enter into the sense of urgency and tragedy which there was; the marriage of the King's son was going to be delayed because the guests didn't want to come. The shame, even anger, of the King (cp. God) and the bridegroom (cp. Christ) need to be imagined; and this really is the feeling of the Father and Son whenever the Gospel is rejected. And time and again it happens, from Sunday School kids to those hundreds who every year complete Bible study courses and turn away from the call.

These two parables show the blessing which will go behind the efforts to spread the Gospel to all the world in the last days. There is a fervent, *urgent* desire of the Lord for this, and so His blessing will surely be with all who catch the same spirit of urgency. According to the parable, the quality of converts is sacrificed (by the Lord, not us) for the sake of numbers-which connects with the idea that the coming of Christ is to some degree dependent upon the full number of the Gentiles being converted (Rom. 11:25). Likewise the drag net was brought to land once it was full of fish (Mt. 13:48). The Lord speaks of how "few" (the Greek implies physically weak, cp. the unwanted labourers in the market place) the labourers are (Mt. 9:37), and therefore more (numerically) are needed. Any lamentation about the weakness of the latter day ecclesia must be seen in this context; the Lord is desperate for the places at the supper to be filled, although woe to those who come in without a wedding garment (Mt. 22:12).

Low Expectations

The Lord therefore has self-confessedly low expectations of the latter day ecclesia. He is the Jesus who understands human weakness. He challenged us that if we truly eat His words, we'll never hunger or thirst (Jn. 6:35); but 30 years or so later, He said that in the Kingdom, He will stop us hungering and thirsting (Rev. 7:16,17). He realizes that although we have it within our potential to live this kind of fulfilled spiritual life, in practice we will only get there in the Kingdom. The parable of the sower shows how the Lord foresaw that the majority who responded to His word would not hold on; He knew that men would not immediately appreciate the blood of His cross, but would prefer the old wine of the old covenant (Lk. 5:39). He saw that our spiritual growth would be an agonizingly slow business; as slow as a tiny mustard seed growing into a tree, as slow as a man digging a foundation in rock, or a seed growing and bringing forth fruit. Such growth is *very slow from a human perspective*.

Good and bad guests come together to the wedding (Mt. 22:10), there are wise and foolish virgins, good and bad fish slopping around all over each other, wheat and tares growing together...this is a real emphasis. An appreciation of this will end the image that if someone's a Christian they must be spiritually OK, that we're all loving aunties and uncles, that somehow Christian = safe. I know this isn't what we want to hear the Lord saying. But whatever else are we supposed to take all this emphasis to mean? The rejected in Mt. 22:12

are described as " friend" , the same term the Lord used about Judas (Mt. 26:50). The suggestion is that there are Judases amongst us, although we can't identify them (and shouldn't try), just as the disciples couldn't. The evil servant who (in Christ's eyes) beat his brethren was a hypocrite, he didn't appear to men to be like that (Mt. 24:48-51); he was only cut asunder, revealed for who he was, at the judgment. He appeared to be an ecclesial elder who loved the flock.

Christ's low expectations of us are clearly demonstrated when He told the parables of the weddings. When you put them together, you get this picture: God made the wedding between Christ and us. The invited guests didn't bother coming, for very trivial, mundane reasons that they put in front of the honour of being invited to His wedding. Only tramps and beggars come to it, motivated selfishly by the thought of a free meal (cp. a penny for the day). But we, the bride, aren't ready (although Christ graciously doesn't mention that in the parable), and so He delays to come to the wedding. Back home, His most trusted household servants realize that He's delaying His return, and start to get drunk and beat each other. The excited young bridesmaids lose their enthusiasm and go to sleep. Eventually, the wedding happens, but some of the guests don't bother to turn up in a wedding garment, just in their filthy rags. The impression is clearly this: *the whole thing's a mess!* Yet this is the marriage of the Son of God to His dearly purchased bride, for whom He died, and lived a life of total self-control. Yet He *knew* the whole thing would be such a mess. No wonder Jesus so understands human weakness. But let's try to enter into the sense of shame and hurt which He must feel at our apathy; the shame is similar to the shame of the farmer who has tares growing in his field. Everyone sees it's the result of his workers sleeping instead of keeping the night watch as they should have done (Mt. 13:25). The Lord foresaw this; He saw that the ultimate harvest wouldn't be a good one. Even some that looked like " good seed" would be rejected (Mt. 8:12 cp. 13:38). Yet in this same context, Christ speaks of how the believer starts off as a tiny mustard seed, but in the Kingdom grows into a tree which will shelter others (Mt. 13:32). He saw *how* small are our spiritual beginnings compared to our position in the Kingdom. The least in the Kingdom will be spiritually greater than John the Baptist was in his mortal life (Mt. 11:11).

Did you know your Lord was like this, full of sympathy, and yet a realist, so fully aware of how pathetic our response would be, on a community and individual level?

Notes

(1) The way the servant was judged out of his own mouth, with the Lord being the kind of man he thought He was, is surely the principle of Ps. 90:11: " Even according to thy fear, so is thy wrath" (in practice).

(2) The prodigal son represents us all, according to the links between this parable and other Scripture.

3-17 The Sensitivity Of Jesus

How Far...?

The Lord's parables were not just made up by Him off the cuff. They are evidently the outcome of much prior thought and reflection, perhaps during the carpenter years (and hours). They reflect the sensitivity of Jesus. The basis of their message was doubtless part of the private revelation which the Father made to the Son, which He faithfully spoke forth to us. And yet one guesses that the formulation of the parables was the work of the Lord's own mind, rather than speaking them forth directly from the Father as a kind of fax transmission. We therefore see in them much indirect revelation of the Lord's character. On one level, it is possible to see the story-line of the parables as just the necessary machinery in order to deliver the basic message. But let's remember that the Father and Son are of much higher intellect to ourselves. The way the Lord Jesus used the parables as He did, comprehensively answering every point of His detractors, revealing their weakness, and displaying the character of God all in a few brief, simple words, is proof enough of the intellectual and spiritual genius of Jesus of Nazareth. We use so much language and packaging that is redundant. Yet it seems hard to believe that the Father and Son would do the same. Some of the parables are given a very detailed interpretation by the Lord Jesus; clearly He saw every detail as significant. Again, it seems unlikely that other parables were not intended to be read in the same way, but rather on a more superficial level. The fact that some of their details seem so obviously redundant to us, without meaning, is to be expected seeing that we lack the mind, intellectually or spiritually, of the Son of God. We would be better to just accept that we fail to apprehend their meaning (at the moment), rather than come to the conclusion that sometimes the Lord's parables are intended to be interpreted very closely, whilst others are just stories giving a basic message. This is effectively limiting God's word in accordance with the limits of our own spiritual apprehension; we would be implying that the meaning of God's word is bounded by our own interpretational ability.

The Lord Jesus "knew what was in man", not only by direct revelation from the Father and the Old Testament word, but also from His own observation of our own nature, both in Himself and the surrounding world. The sensitivity of Jesus is reflected in this realization which He reflects. As the Samaritan came near to the wounded man (the ecclesia), realized the extent of his problem (the ravages of sin) and was thereby moved with compassion, so Christ was motivated by His consideration of our position (Lk. 10:33,34); the Lord realized His humanity more and more, and progressively humbled Himself, achieving a progressively fuller identity with us by so doing, until He crowned it all by His death (Phil. 2:6-8). The main lying helpless on the Jerusalem - Jericho road was surely modelled on Zedekiah being overtaken there by his enemies (Jer. 39:5). When the Lord spoke of how we must come down from our good seats at the feast and take the lowest seat (Lk. 14:9), He's actually again referring to Zedekiah, who likewise had to come down from his throne and take a lowly seat (Jer. 13:18). That weak, vacillating man basically loved God's word, he wanted to be obedient, but just couldn't bring himself to do it. And so he was, quite justly, condemned. It's as if the Lord saw in that wretched, pathetic man a type of all those He came to save. And even in this wretched position, the Lord will pick us up and carry us home. This gives a fine, fine insight into His sensitivity to us. Indeed, several times the Spirit in the NT uses OT pictures of unworthy believers as the basis of a description of the faithful. We are of (Christ's) bones and flesh (Eph. 5:32) is a direct allusion back to the way David called the men of Judah *who were not enthusiastic for his return in glory* "my bones and my flesh" (2 Sam. 19:11,12).

The Lord Jesus also looked forward to the development of His future body as the ecclesia (e.g. Ps. 22:25; Mt. 18:17). He must have seen the problems we would face, He knew our weakness; as Moses, superb type of Christ that he was, looked ahead to the future weakness of Israel, so did the Lord Jesus [\(1\)](#). Even in practical issues, He may have foreseen our state

in the twenty first century far more than we realize; and again, in this we see the sensitivity of Jesus. Thus He speaks of the believer praying in his bedroom (Mt. 6:6)- at a time when private rooms were almost unheard of amongst ordinary folk. The degree to which the Lord foresaw our struggles even in His humanity should provide great stimulus in the difficult business of building up a personal relationship with Him now. For in His heavenly glory, His empathy with us is *even greater* than in His mortal life. He endured our nature and temptations *so that* He might be an empathetic High Priest (consider the implications of Heb. 2:10,17; 4:14,15; 5:1,2); Christ was fully consecrated as High Priest after His death, and it was then that He began to be the sympathetic, understanding High Priest which the Hebrew letter speaks of. The fact that Christ knows so thoroughly our feelings here and now, especially our struggles for personal righteousness, should *of itself* encourage our awareness of and relationship with Him.

The Problem Of Defending The Faith

The parables are full of almost incidental indications of how well the Lord knew our nature and how accurately He foresaw the future struggles of His body. He foresaw that the elder brothers would be self-righteous and unwilling to accept back into fellowship the repentant. Yet instead of making the father address the older boy with words like " You hypocrite! You yourself are disobedient! Get away from me, you callous hypocrite!" , the Lord puts the words of grace themselves in the father's mouth: " Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine" (Lk. 15:30). The Lord foresaw that the elder brethren's relationship with the Father would be damaged by their harshness. But in the way the story ends, I see real hope for the hard line, right wing Christian who condemns his brother, in the light of the Lord's teaching that we will be judged as we have judged. Wrong such brethren certainly are; but their Lord is gracious enough, it seems, to still work with them. In the same breath as the Lord warned that by our words we will be justified and condemned, and that we will have to account for them at the judgment, He also said that whoever speaks words against Him, He will forgive. I'd like to concentrate on other examples of where the Lord Jesus in His sensitivity foresaw this problem of dealing with apparently weak believers.

He foresaw that the hardest working brethren would be bitter at His acceptance of the weaker ones. His comment to them, " Is thine eye evil, because I am good?" (Mt. 20:15) was quarried from Jonah 4:2-4, where Jonah is also asked a similar question after his bitterness that God had allowed Nineveh to repent. We must be aware that such self righteousness and uncomfortableness at the repentance of others is a feature of our very essential nature. The Lord Jesus overcame this aspect of His nature superbly.

The parables of the two carpenters and the tares in the field show Christ's recognition that His followers would have a keen interest in the weaknesses of their brethren. He foresaw what has been the consistent problem of all groups who have held His true teaching, from the early church through the Bible-believing communities of Central Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries, and right through our experience from the 1850s onwards: the problem of how to deal with members of the church who appear to err from the Truth He taught. In the primary context of sunny Galilee in the AD30s, His emphasis on these things would have appeared irrelevant to the 12. But the Lord's mind was far far ahead, way beyond His time, foreseeing the schisms of 40 years' time, imagining the struggles of His body 1900 years later. Consider the story He told of the carpenter with a beam in his own eye who is so keen to extract the splinter from the eye of his fellow worker (note how he almost forces himself upon his brother to do this!). There is something grotesque, absurd, over the top in this story. Christ's

parables often have an element of unreality in them to highlight how His attitudes are unusual (e.g. the employer who pays all his men the same wages for different hours of work). And these unusual attitudes of His reflect the sensitivity of Jesus.

But in this story of the two carpenters there is something not only unreal, but almost cartoon-like. We read it and think 'The Lord's obviously exaggerating, nobody would really be so foolish'. But that's exactly how He knew we would think! Our attempts to sort out our brother really are that absurd! Christ is effectively saying: 'Now, I know you'll think I'm exaggerating- but I'm not' (Lk. 6:41,42). Often it seems the Lord intends us to think His parables through to their end, imagining the necessary details. A splinter will come out of the eye naturally, it's presence will provoke tears which ultimately will wash it out. 'The grief of life will work on your brother to solve his problem, there are some spiritual weaknesses which time and the experience of life will heal; but I know you people will want to rush in and speed up the spiritual growth of your brother. But you can't do it!'. Christ even foresaw how we will stress the fact that our fellow believer is our "brother" as we try to do this; as if we'll try to be so righteous in the very moment when in God's eyes we do something grotesquely foolish. Doubtless the Lord's carpenter years were the time when He formulated this story. Perhaps He intends us to take it further, and pick up the implication that these two carpenters couldn't help each other; but there's another one who can...

The same awareness of our desire to inappropriately sort out the problems of Christ's ecclesia is shown in the parable of the tares; "wilt thou then that we go and gather them up?" (Mt. 13:28) shows Christ's knowledge that this would be the desire of His servants throughout the generations. If we take His teaching seriously, we must come to the conclusion that all of us have a desire to "help" our brethren by 'sorting out' the weaknesses which we see in them, but that there is the real possibility that often this desire is spiritually grotesque in God's eyes. According to the parable of the tares, we are very sure that we know who are the tares and who are the wheat. But we can't be as sure as we feel, is the Lord's message. Some we feel are obviously tares are actually wheat. And the sensitivity of Jesus foresaw this so accurately.

There's a fascinating twist in this story that is exactly descriptive of our experience. The servants slept first of all, after the word was first sown, and only once the wheat and tares came to bear fruit did they pester the Master to let them root up the tares. This reference to bearing fruit must be read in the context of the preceding parable of the sower, which describes how the good ground bears fruit (Mt. 13: 26, 8). The implication is that the servants shouldn't have been sleeping first of all, thinking there wasn't really much to do in the field. And so it is a familiar pattern: conversion is followed by a period of feeling there isn't much to do, and then the realization dawns that due to our own negligence in those early days there are some tares in the ecclesia. The desire to sort out the tares therefore comes some time *after* conversion. And on the overall level, there is another truism: the servants of Christ are keener to eradicate error than stop it in the first place. It's sad to see that there is almost a despising today of the warnings against 'the thin end of the wedge'; awareness of the possibility of apostasy is seen as somehow negative- exactly as the parable predicts. The parable implies that *if* a greater level of watchfulness was maintained by the servants, there wouldn't be the tares. But, as the Lord foresaw, we seem to lack this watchfulness, often under the guise of feeling that we must sort ourselves out rather than guard against apostasy being introduced.

Spiritual Inappropriacy

The sensitivity of Jesus constructed that parable with the aim of showing the thoughtful how deeply inappropriate is their desire to root up the tares. He clearly had in mind the prophecy of Himself in 2 Sam. 23:6,7: " The sons of Belial shall be all of them as thorns thrust away, because they cannot be taken by (human) hands: but the man that shall touch them (Christ) must be fenced with iron and the staff of a spear; and they shall be utterly burned with fire in the same place (just outside Jerusalem) " where Christ was " fenced with iron" . It isn't possible for us to uproot the tares because this can only possibly be done by the one who totally uprooted sin in Himself, dying to it on the cross. This association between Christ's right to judge and His victorious death is shown by the way the " tares" will be burnt in the same area as He was crucified in. Phil. 2:9-11 reasons along the same lines; because Christ died for us, He *therefore* has the right to have every knee bowing to Him at the judgment. On account of being " the Son of man" and yet also being our perfect Messiah, He has the right *therefore* to be judge (Jn. 5:27 cp. Dan. 7:13,14). The Lord understood all this; and to the thoughtful, those who would grasp His allusion to 2 Sam. 23, He was saying: 'If you think you can root up the tares, if you think you have that wisdom to identify the tares, you are really insulting the greatness of what I achieved on the cross. It's only on account of that that I have the ability and right to divide wheat from tares, sheep from goats'.

The Lord Jesus Christ's sensitivity to our thinking that we really have borne His cross comes out in Mt. 20:22: " Are ye able to drink of the cup that I drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? And they said, We are able" . Those men, with all their unspirituality, could quite coolly state that they wanted the highest place in the Kingdom, and could say with confidence that they could shoulder the cross of Christ. The Lord's reply was gracious and generous spirited indeed: " Ye shall indeed drink of my cup" - 'when you're a lot more spiritually mature', He could have added. We *sense* rather than are explicitly told His sensitivity to men thinking they can shoulder His cross; for He alone knows what the cross of Christ entailed and entails. And in speaking of our own sufferings, we too need to learn these lessons, and compare our sufferings against Christ's with the utmost caution, with the sensitivity to *His* feelings, recognizing that we must act as men and women who have been *counted as if* we shared His death, and not as those who have actually " resisted unto blood (in our) striving against sin" . To confidently identify some of our brethren as tares is only one example of the way in which we can hurt our Lord's feelings, by acting and thinking in ways which are only appropriate for He who did actually carry the cross [\(2\)](#).

More Examples Of The Sensitivity of Jesus

We have only considered one area in which our Lord foresaw so clearly our likely weaknesses. I'd like to conclude with a few more examples of where how we reason in our weakness was exactly foreseen by the Lord:

- The story of the candle that was put under a bucket brings out an issue related to that of the desire to root up the tares: the candle was put there (presumably) on account of an almost paranoiac fear that the wind would blow it out; but this over-protection of the lamp in itself caused the light to go out (Mt. 5:15). Time and again, preaching the light, holding up the beacon of the word of Christ's cross, has been impeded or stifled in the name of preserving the truth, strengthening what remains (words taken out of context). And because of this lack of witness, this lack of holding out the light to others, the fire of Christ has waxed dim amongst us. This ties in to the theme that preaching is not just commanded as a publicity exercise for Almighty God; He doesn't need us to do that for Him. It is commanded for the benefit of the preacher more than those preached to. To put a candle under a bucket or bed

seems senseless; yet this is how senseless and inappropriate it is to hold back preaching for the sake of defending the Faith. Indeed to put it under a bed (Mk. 4:21) and then go to sleep (candles are normally only lit at night) is likely to destroy the person who does it, to burn them while they are asleep. All who have the light but don't preach it (in whatever form) are likely to suffer the same; notice how the Lord (by implication) links night time and sleepiness with an apathy in preaching. Evidently the Lord foresaw the attitude that has surfaced amongst His people in the late twentieth century: 'We must concentrate on keeping the Truth, new converts are often problematic, too much energy goes to preaching rather than building up ourselves in ("our most holy"!) faith'. Probably the resistance to preaching to the Gentiles in the first century used similar reasoning.

- The lost sheep who leaves the fold and goes off (Mt. 18:12) is based on Ps. 119:176: "I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek thy servant; for I do not forget thy commandments". The lost sheep that is found therefore has the attitude of recognizing it is lost, that it is still the servant of the shepherd although isolated from him, and still has not forgotten the things of God's word. The picture in Ps. 119:176 is strange indeed: a lost sheep asking the shepherd to come and find him. It's as if the sheep talks to himself, feeling the shepherd can't and won't hear, feeling that he's just too far away. And this is *exactly, exactly* the position of all those who leave the faith and return: they don't forget the doctrines of the Truth, in their hearts they feel too far away, but they wish somehow something could happen to get them back. This explains the type of sheep one is dealing with in the parable, and why the parable isn't true of all who go astray.

- There is an element of unreality in the story of the lost sheep. And that unreality reflects the sensitivity of Jesus. The shepherd doesn't return the sheep to the fold, but takes it home and calls his friends round to see the dumb animal and rejoice (Lk. 15:4-6). The Lord knew we would frown a bit at this. He foresaw how hard it would be for us to rejoice in the return of a difficult sheep to fellowship.

- The labourers who were chosen to work first were the spiritually strong ones. Those still standing at the end of the day were probably weak or old; nobody wanted to hire *them*. The Lord foresaw how the apparently 'strong' in the ecclesia would struggle (and may still struggle at the judgment) with the fact that the weaker ones get, essentially, the same salvation as them.

- The parable of the prodigal ends on a negative note. The older brother's bitterness doesn't heal, he won't join the family, and his bitterness at his brother's repentance not only damages his own relationship with the Father, but also casts a shadow over the rejoicing. This is so realistic; the sad truth of this has been worked out hundreds of times in the history of His body. The gain of one brother so often means the loss of another.

- The parable of the wine exactly predicted the attitude of people to Christ's work in taking the Old Covenant out of the way. The Lord is surely saying: 'I know you won't immediately want the blood of my new covenant. I understand your nature, by nature you'll prefer what you are familiar with, the Old Covenant,; you won't "straightway" desire the new wine, but (by implication) you will, after a while' (Lk. 5:39). He foresaw how the implication of the blood of His sacrifice wouldn't be accepted by His people first of all. It would be a process, of coming to accept how radical the gift of His blood is. As we weekly take the cup of His covenant, we come to see more and more the excellency of that blood, and its supremacy over all else. Christ recognized that conservatism in human nature which will naturally shy

away from the marvellous implications of what He achieved for us. And true enough, whenever we talk about the present aspect of the Kingdom of God, our present blessings of redemption in Christ, the sense in which we have already been saved...there is a desire to shy away from it all. And true enough, the early Christian believers desperately clung on to the Mosaic food laws, circumcision and synagogue attendance as far as they could; the command to witness to the Gentiles was likewise not taken seriously for some time. It must have been painful for the Lord to know this and to see it, recognizing in it a lack of appreciation of His life and final sacrifice, a desire to reconcile with God without totally committing oneself to His work. He saw the possibility of His blood being wasted if men didn't change from old to new wineskins. The slowness of the changeover in attitudes amongst the early believers must have been a great pain to Him; as if His blood was being poured out again. The implication is that we shed His blood afresh if we won't change, if we allow the conservatism of our natures to have an iron grip upon us we not only destroy ourselves, but waste the blood of the Son of God. The picture of the new wine being "spilled" uses the same word as in Mt. 26:28 concerning the 'shedding' of Christ's blood. Again, how utterly, painfully accurate. This is the danger of the conservatism that is in our natures; it was this which led men to shed the Lord's blood, and it is this same element within us which He foresaw would lead us to crucify Him afresh. How many times has this conservatism been mistaken as true spirituality! How careful we must be, therefore, not to adopt any attitude which glorifies that conservatism and masks it as the hallmark of a stable believer. The sensitivity of Jesus to the value of the human person was the very opposite of this.

Notes

(1) See [*Moses: Spiritual Pinnacle*](#).

(2) Against the teaching of this parable must be balanced our duty to separate from that and those which are false. This must be done, but without the implication that our act of separation is the uprooting of the tares.

3-18 The Grace Of Jesus

The grace of Jesus and His Father, so great, *so* free, was a challenge for even the Lord to express in any verbal medium. The way He spoke was grace itself. He wept over the men of Jerusalem, sorrowing that their destruction must come because "thou knewest not the time of thy visitation" (Lk. 19:44). He could have quite well said: "because you have rejected me..." . But His grace was greater than to say that. The utter inappropriacy of our salvation is brought out time and again in His teaching. The oil lamp with the bruised reed and smoking flax which annoyingly filled the house with smoke was nurtured and tolerated in hope by this Lord of ours. We in these last days are "the poor and the maimed and the halt and the blind" who lay in the city streets (Lk. 14:21). Yet we are invited and lead (the blind) or dragged / carried (the lame) into the great supper. For those who deeply meditated, the lame at the great man's table would have taken them back to lame Mephibosheth at David's table. His response to the invitation was to *bow*; think of a lame man bowing. How awkward it must have been, and how awkward he must have felt. "I'm a dead dog, from a family who cruelly hated you; why, why me?" was his response. And this ought to be ours. The awkward bow of that lame man, however embarrassing it was to watch for David in his glory, is a superb type of our

attempts to respond to the inexplicable grace we have received from the Lord. He knows our weakness. Even though He taught plainly that 'the majority' (Gk; AV " many") of those He called would not be chosen, His parables often use percentages which imply that two thirds (parable of the pounds) or half (parable of the virgins) *will* respond. This shows the love that hopes, in the face of the finest knowledge and foreknowledge of human nature which any man has ever had.

A Penny A Day

The pureness of the grace of the Lord Jesus is hard to plumb. He knew that the extent of His grace would cause others to stumble. The element of unreality in the parable of the labourers shows this. He hired the labourers no-one else wanted, the old and weak workers, some of them only for an hour, and still gave them a day's pay. They must have walked away from the pay table with their heads spinning, scarcely daring to believe what they held in their hands- a matchless picture of the response of the faithful after learning of their acceptance at the day of judgment. But the outlook of those who felt their salvation (the penny) was less by grace than the others became bitter: " Is thine eye evil, because I am good?" (Mt. 20:15). In saying this, the Lord was referring back to Dt. 15:9, which warned Israel not to have an evil eye towards their poverty stricken brother (cp. the unwanted labourer) who asked for a loan near the time of the year of release, when all debts were cancelled. In the year of release, Israel were " to remit every private debt...and not *demand* it of thy brother" (Dt. 15:2 LXX). This is behind Mt. 18:28, where Christ speaks of the man who demands repayment from his brother. The Lord is implying: You should live in the spirit of the year of release all the time, giving without expecting. Lk. 6:35 has the year of release in mind, in the idea of lending without expecting anything back. This only happened in the year of release. " Is thine eye evil, because I am good" is therefore saying that the Lord's grace towards the poverty-stricken labourer had provoked an " evil eye" in the others, they somehow felt that they were having to give to him, that they were standing to lose by his acceptance. Yet, as the Lord implies, this is a nonsense attitude. Of course we don't stand to lose anything by another's acceptance! And it's possible to reason that it was those 11th hour labourers represent the accepted, whilst the complainers are rejected (" Go thy way" has been read by some as meaning they were fired whilst the others were taken on permanently [\(1\)](#)). But with what superb accuracy does He get right inside the future mentality of many in His ecclesia! How very very true this parable has been time and again in the history of our community. Discussion of and practice of the idea of grace has provoked untold bitterness amongst those who feel they live less by grace.

The grace of Jesus framed the parable of the man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho in terms of Zedekiah's flight from Jerusalem (2 Kings 25:4); a man who had repeatedly spurned the offers God made to him through Jeremiah, and who was attacked on that road by the Babylonians (cp. the robbers). Yet the parable shows that Christ will graciously save even a man like that; for according to the parable, Zedekiah represents every one of us.

The Fanatic Shepherd

The element of unreality in the parables often brings out the grace of Jesus the Lord. The farmer who hires weak, useless servants (those rejected by other employers) and gives them a day's wages for an hour's work is one clear example. And so too, if we think about it, is the Lord's story of the shepherd who so madly loves his sheep, whose life is so taken up by his job, that he would die to save one of them, and comes back triumphantly rejoicing when he

has found the lost sheep (Lk. 15:5). The average shepherd would have surely accepted that some sheep are lost, it's the luck of the game. But this shepherd who dropped all and ran off after one lost sheep was no usual shepherd. And the element of unreality in the story brings out the Lord's grace towards us. Note in passing how the man : sheep relationship portrays that between us and Christ. As the sheep understood pathetically little about the shepherd's sacrifice to save it, so we too fail to appreciate the height of the fact that Christ died for us, as the shepherd for the sheep. In this was the grace of Jesus.

The Unprofitable Servant

The story of the slave who worked all day in the field and was then expected to come home and cook for his master without a word of thanks to him seems to be more realistic, lacking this element of unreality. But the Greek word "charis", usually translated "grace", is the one used for "thank" here (Lk. 17:9). The point is that we don't receive grace because of our going the extra mile, as we are inclined to think. We receive grace, but not as a result of all our special efforts; these are what are expected of us, on account of the fact that we have become slaves to our Master, the Lord Jesus. At the end of all our special efforts (in whatever sphere), we must consciously make an effort to recognize that we are "unprofitable servants" (Lk. 17:10). This must surely connect with Mt. 25:30, which describes the rejected at the day of judgment as unprofitable servants. If we judge / condemn ourselves, we will not be condemned (1 Cor. 11:31). This is just one of many examples of where the Lord's parables seem intended to be linked with each other- which further proves that they are not stories with a deeper meaning, whose storyline is not intended to be carefully considered. We must recognize not only that we are unprofitable servants, but that we have only done what was our "duty" or debt to do- the implication being that we were sold into slavery on account of an unpayable debt. This is exactly the figure used by the Lord to describe us in Mt. 18:25.

But there is a telling detail in Lk. 17:10 which further reflects the grace of Jesus: "When ye *shall have done* (not 'when you do') all these things which are commanded you, (you will) say, We are unprofitable servants". It may be that this is taking us forward to the Kingdom; it is at the judgment that we 'do all' (Eph. 6:13), it is in the Kingdom that we will obey all the commandments (Ps. 119:6). This parable is a glimpse into the appreciation of grace we will have as we enter the Kingdom; once we are fully righteous, we will realize how unprofitable we are of ourselves (notice we may still feel in a sense "unprofitable" then). We will realize that all our service is only the repaying of the huge debt incurred by our sinfulness. *Then*, and perhaps only then, will we see works in their true perspective. This surely is the purpose of the judgment seat. We will walk away with the sense of wonder at the grace of Jesus that filled the one-hour workers as they walked away from the pay table with a day's wages.

Our Inability To Recompense

Our inability to do *any* works in the sense of extra acts of pleasure to God is brought out in the parable of the great supper. Christ prefaced this with the command: "When thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind...for they cannot recompense thee; for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just" (Lk. 14:13,14). He then goes on to describe how the Father and Himself put this into practice; in the invitation to the Kingdom, "the poor, and the maimed, and the halt and the blind" (Lk. 14:21) are invited; with the implication that Christ will be "recompensed at the resurrection of the just". We don't recompense Him now by our works; we are lost sheep causing Him needless work and worry, wasting His goods and needing to get ourselves out of the problem (Lk. 16:1), needing His

frank forgiveness for our huge debts (Mt. 18:24). As Job recognized, if we are righteous, we give nothing to God (Job 35:7). Our *unrighteousness* commends God's righteousness (Rom. 3:5). All things come *out of God*: " Who hath first given to him? ...for of him, and through him, and to him, are all things" (Rom. 11:35,36); it's give, give, give with God. We are the poor beggars sitting down at the great supper, unable to recompense. Of course, it depends where we put the emphasis. The parable which relates how Christ desires fruit from us is followed by that of the marriage supper, where it seems we are just asked to accept an invitation with humility (Mt. 21:34; 22:3). The point surely is that we are invited, for no reason, to the Kingdom, and we must accept with the humility that will accompany a recognition of such grace (Lk. 14:9). But our experience of this grace will inevitably bring forth some spiritual fruit.

Again, it seems we are intended to follow the story through, and visualize the inappropriate, uncultured conduct of these beggars at the table, causing so much unspoken embarrassment and pain to the generous rich man. The link with Is. 55:1-3 would suggest that we can interpret the call to the supper as the call of the Gospel, and the hungry people sitting down to a fine meal as our ecclesial experience now (although this isn't to say that we can't read it as concerning the future Kingdom too). The preceding Lk. 14:8-11 describe us as sitting down at the feast in this life, until the host walks in and starts re-arranging the seating order (cp. the coming of Christ in judgment on His household). We are left to imagine the grabbing for food, the greedy, selfish eyeing up of the plates, the grasping, the lack of social skills, the lack of good conversation between each other, the occasional cursing under the breath, perhaps even throwing of food, the eager desire for wine, the lack of restraint. All in the company of the Master (God) and His servants (Christ and the Angels). And this, it seems to me, was the Lord's imagination of His immature ecclesia, feasting on the good things He has prepared for us. Can we not begin to enter just a little into the pain and acute embarrassment and sadness we cause to our gracious Host by the self-centredness of our natures, manifest as it is in spiritual terms so often? It's quite possible to become so spiritually selfish, so bent on our own salvation, that the whole spirit of the supper is lost. After all, the idea of a large supper is to inculcate a social spirit rather than just to provide individual feeding to each of the guests. How many times has it been reasoned in these last days: 'Sorry, I have to work out my own salvation, I just can't spare time and can't risk association with my weaker brethren...'. And the Lord Jesus, in His perfect way, saw this coming as in sunny Galilee He formulated His parables of grace.

Predestination

One example of the Lord Jesus' emphasis on our salvation being through grace rather than our works is found in the way the parables teach that our acceptance is to some degree dependent on our predestination. Thus the parable of the types of ground suggests that we are good or bad ground at the time the seed is first sown; the fish are good or bad at the time they first enter the net; the wise virgins take the oil with them from the start of their vigil. I would suggest that this is not just part of the story. It was evidently within the Lord's ability to construct stories which featured the idea of bad seed or fish etc. changing to good, and vice versa. But He didn't; indeed, His emphasis seems to have been on the idea of predestination. This isn't to decry the effort for spirituality which we must make; but His stress of the predestination factor is surely to remind us of the degree to which our calling and salvation is by pure grace.

Imputed Righteousness

Through the grace of Jesus, He is in love with us; He has called us to be His bride. He sees us in an extremely positive light. He counts us as righteous to a degree that is a real struggle to believe- even during His ministry, " when we were yet sinners" , and when the only example He had of His bride were those faltering 12. He tells the Jews that His people will fast and mourn for His absence after His departure, with the intensity that the friends of the bridegroom would have if the groom suddenly collapsed and died at the wedding (this seems to be the picture of Mt. 9:15, seeing " taken away" as an idiom for sudden death). This is surely a positive view of the sorrow of the body of Christ for their Lord's absence. Even if we see in this mini-parable only a description of the disciples' sorrow after the Lord's death, He is giving a very positive description of the disciples' joy, saying that they didn't fast for joy of being with Him; He describes their joy as the joy of the friends of the groom at the wedding. Yet the Gospels paint the twelve as a struggling, uncertain group of men, eaten up with the petty arguments of this life, unused to the self-control of fasting. Peter, for example, had until very recently been a possibly immoral young fisherman (1 Pet. 4:3).

The happiness of the disciples is explained in terms of them being at a wedding. The happiness of the wedding is normally associated with alcohol, and the context of Mt. 9:15 goes on to explain that Christ's new covenant is symbolised by new wine. The difference between John's disciples and Christ's was that Christ's were full of the joy of the new covenant. But there is ample reason to think that they were heavily influenced by Judaist thinking; they didn't go and preach to the Gentile world as Christ commanded, and even Peter was marvellously slow to realize the Jewish food laws had been ended by Christ, despite the Lord's strong implication of this in Mk. 7:19 (not AV). Yet the grace of Jesus saw His men *as if* they had grasped the meaning of the new covenant, *as if* they had the joy of true faith in and understanding of His work; and He spoke of them to the world in these terms. We can take untold comfort from this; for we dare to believe that the Lord does and will confess our name (character) in a like exalted manner to the Father and His Angels.

Just before His death, in full knowledge of the disciples' impending collapse of faith, the grace of Jesus confidently spoke of how His men would not follow " a stranger...but will flee from him" (Jn. 10:5). But the disciples fled from their Lord in Gethsemane, as He knew they would (from Zech. 13:7, cp. Mt. 26:31) at the time He said those words. He knew that He must die for the sheep who would scatter each one to His own way (Is. 53:6). " The time cometh...when ye shall be scattered, every man to his own" (Jn. 16:32); and true enough, they all fled from Him (Mt. 26:56). But in Jn. 10 He spoke of His followers as calm, obedient sheep who would not scatter if they had a good shepherd (Jn. 10:12); even though He knew they would. The Lord's way of imputing such righteousness to His followers seems to be brought out in Jn. 10:4 cp. 6: " The sheep follow Him (Christ): for they know (understand, appreciate) His voice...this parable spake Jesus unto them: but they understood not what things they were which he spake" , i.e. they didn't know His voice.

We are described as Christ's " own servants" , i.e. His special, trusted, right-hand men (Mt. 25:14)- even the one talent man who did nothing at all. He searches for the lost sheep until He finds it (Lk. 15:4)- as if He positively assumed that surely all lost sheep will return. This is surely a high view to have of us, higher, sadly, than we merit.

Christ And Israel

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is perhaps most clearly seen in His attitude to Israel. So many of the parables refer in some way to the love of God and Christ for Israel; and their

love for rebellious, indifferent Israel is the supreme example of pure grace (2). He felt towards them as a hen for her chicks (Lk. 13:34). Here again is an element of unreality; a hen whose very own chicks won't be gathered under her wings. This seems to go right against nature; the pain of the rejected parent was there in the experience of the Lord. He wasn't just passively enduring the polemics of the Pharisees; they were His chicks, He really wanted them under His wings (cp. Israel dwelling under the wings of the cherubim). We must ever remember this when we read the records of Him arguing with them and exposing their hypocrisy. He wasn't just throwing back their questions, playing the game and winning, just surviving from day to day with them. He was trying to gather them, and their rejection of His words really hurt Him. Their reproach broke His heart; He didn't just brazenly endure it as we might the ravings of a drunken man (Ps. 69:20).

Lk. 13:7,8 teaches that after the three years of His ministry, during Christ's final six months, God suggested to Christ that the nation of Israel be cut down (this is but one example of the private intercourses between Father and Son). The Lord knew when He must die soon; He had already steadfastly set His face to go to die at Jerusalem (Lk. 9:51). It seems to me that He knew He would be killed by the Jews in a few months time. But He asks the Father to spare Israel for at least another year- as if to show that He knew they wouldn't accept Him even after His death, but He's saying to God: 'Give them a chance even after they kill me'. Those who think further along the lines suggested by the parable will see that in reality, Israel were not cut down by God for another 37 years. The implication is that this was due to Christ's pleading with God during those years for patience to be shown to the nation who rejected and crucified Him. The element of unreality in the story reflects the grace of Jesus- for it was unthinkable for a servant to argue back with his master, asking not to do what he had been ordered to do.

The Lord so respected Israel that He felt giving the Gospel to the Gentiles instead of them was like casting good food to dogs (Mk. 7:27). Israel (the children) didn't want to eat, but the Lord painted them as if they did. The " crumb" that was cast to the dogs was a great miracle; but Christ saw that as only a crumb of the huge meal that was prepared for Israel. It seems the idea here is meant to be connected with His invitation to us to sit at table with Him and share the meal, both now (Lk. 14:8) and in the Kingdom (Lk. 12:37). Just one crumb of the Lord's meal is a mighty miracle, and yet we are asked to sit down and eat the whole meal with Him: as symbolised in our eating of " the Lord's supper" . This is an eloquent picture of the greatness of our position as members of His table now, as well as in the future.

The Enthusiastic Lord

This enthusiasm for Israel's response to the Gospel comes out again when the grace of Jesus likens Himself to a street kid in the market who really wanted to get a game going with the other kids. He offered to play funerals with them (through His appeal through John the Baptist), but they refused. He then offered to play weddings (through His Gospel of grace, joy and peace), but still they refused (Lk. 7:32). By all means connect this with another market place parable, where Christ (the servant) comes there to try to recruit labourers, on almost unbelievably good rates. The Lord's enthusiasm for the salvation of first century Israel (and us too) comes out in Lk. 14:5 RSV, where He likens the *urgency* of His mission to that of a man whose son has fallen down a well. He simply *must* get there, regardless of the Sabbath rules. And this, says the Lord, is His all out urgency to save men. We have all fallen down the pit from whence we must be rescued (Zech. 9:11). As we distribute leaflets, place our adverts, talk to our contacts, strive in our own character development towards salvation;

this is the verve of the Lord Jesus to save us. It is only the hardness of the human heart that can stand in the way of the mighty enthusiasm of the Son of God for our redemption. Hence the sense of hurt, sadness and frustration to the Master when men refuse His efforts, as typified in the story of the wonderful banquet that was inexplicably spurned by the intended guests (Lk. 14:16). In passing, note the connection of pulling a man out of a pit with Joseph and Jeremiah, types of the Lord's resurrection (cp. Ps. 40:2). When a man is pulled out of the pit at baptism, he is sharing the experience of the resurrected Lord. And the Lord is naturally so urgent that men should share that experience which He suffered so much for.

This enthusiasm, this closeness to us, comes out in Christ's description of Himself as 'taking a far journey' away from us to Heaven. The Greek strictly means 'to leave one's own native people to go abroad'; with the implication that the Lord feels closer towards us than the Angels. This is exactly the line of argument of Hebrews 1 and 2: Christ didn't come to save Angels, He came to save us, therefore He had exactly our nature and feelings, not theirs. He is closely watching our spiritual growth, as the farmer watches the wheat and then *immediately* begins to harvest it once the humidity and growth is just right (Mk. 4:29). This is the enthusiasm with which the Lord watches our growth, not just individually, but as a community, i.e. the whole field. As the growth is still in some sense a mystery to the farmer, so it may be to Christ (Mk. 4:26,27); we grow, " he knoweth not how" . This could be taken as an eloquent essay in the Lord's own limitation of knowledge.

Finally. The Lord's zeal for our redemption and His enthusiasm to see us as righteous is brought out in the parable of the prodigal. The Father (manifest in the Lord) runs out to meet the son. That story was masterfully tied back in to Is. 64:5-8: " Thou meetest him that rejoiceth and worketh righteousness, those that remember thee in thy ways...we have sinned...we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags...but now, O Lord, thou art our father" . The patient, hopeful father saw in the son a boy rejoicing and working righteousness; but this was hardly how *he* felt! And so it will be with Israel in the last days. And so it is with each of us now, in our times of repentance. That surpassing grace is ours; we are seen as working righteousness when all we have is a bitter self-loathing and desire to somehow get back to God. But the crucial point is: *how often* do we have such a true repentance? We repeatedly sin, that we admit. But how frequently is there this kind of repentance which calls forth such grace, to see us as so righteous when we are so unrighteous, the grace of Jesus so great, so free...?

Notes

(1) This is the line of interpretation followed by H.A. Whittaker in his treatment of this parable in *Studies In The Gospels* (Wigan: Biblia, 1984).

(2) This point is repeatedly made, with overflowing evidence, throughout H.A. Whittaker *ibid* and John Carter, *Parables Of The Messiah* (Birmingham: CMPA, 1947).

3-19 The Demanding Lord

Once the Lord asked a man on the way to his father's funeral to immediately follow Him, and quit going to the funeral as he intended (Lk. 9:59). And He criticized the man for not doing

this. Another who wanted to first “bid farewell” to his family was likewise criticized (Lk. 9:61). Even Elisha bid farewell to his family before following Elijah, and Elijah allowed him to do this (1 Kings 19:20)- but the Lord Jesus was more demanding. He described the disciples as a “perverse generation” because they didn’t have enough faith to work a miracle (Lk. 9:41). Or again, He calmly bid them feed a huge crowd with just a few loaves: “How many loaves have ye? Go and see” (Mk. 6:38). We are left to imagine those men, almost paralysed and certainly gobsmacked by the extent of the demand, awkwardly going away to count their few loaves. He could be seen as a demanding Lord. The Lord Jesus said many “hard sayings” which dissuaded people from seriously following Him. He kept speaking about a condemned criminal’s last walk to his cross, and telling people they had to do this. He told them, amidst wondrous stories of flowers and birds, to rip out their eyes, cut off their limbs- and if they didn’t, He didn’t think they were serious and would put a stone round their neck and hurl them into the sea (Mk. 9:42-48). He healed a leper, and then spoke sternly to Him (Mk. 1:43 AV mg.). All three synoptics record how He summarily ordered His weary disciples to feed a crowd numbering thousands in a desert, when they had no food (Mt. 14:16; Mk. 6:37; Lk. 9:13). He criticizes the man who earnestly wished to follow Him, but first had to attend his father’s funeral. “Let the dead bury their dead” (Mt. 8:22) was a shocking, even coarse figure to use- ‘let the dead bodies drag one more dead body into their grave’. And then He went on to speak and show His matchless, endless love. Mark 5 records three prayers to Jesus: “the devils besought him”, and “Jesus gave them leave” (vv. 12,13); the Gadarenes “began to pray him to depart out of their coasts” (v. 17); and He obliged. And yet when the cured, earnestly zealous man “prayed him that he might be with him...Jesus suffered him not” (vv. 18,19). After the fascination, physically and intellectually, had worn off, very few of the crowds continued their interest. The Lord scarcely converted more than 100 people in the course of His ministry. We are familiar, from our own experience of sin and failure, with the pure grace of the Lord Jesus. We see that largeness and generosity of spirit within Him, that manifestation of the God of love, that willingness to concede to our weakness; and therefore we can tend to overlook the fact that the Lord Jesus set uncompromisingly high standards. I would even use the word “demanding” about His attitude. He expressed Himself to the Jews in ways which were almost provocative (consider His Sabbath day miracles). He intended to shake them. He seems to have used hyperbole in order to make the point concerning the high standard of commitment He expects. Thus He spoke of cutting off the limbs that offend. He told those who were interested in following Him that He had nowhere to lay His head (Lk. 9:58). That may have been true that night, but the ministering women surely saw to it that this was not the case with Him most nights. The man who wanted to first attend his father’s funeral was told that this wasn’t good enough; although Abraham and Joseph did this. The man who wanted to go and say farewell to his family was told the same; although Elisha did this (Lk. 9:60,61). The Lord is surely saying that the commitment of such Old Testament giants was to be less than what He expected of those for whom He was to give His all. It isn’t that He won’t *save* a man who (in the parable) puts his father’s funeral before the Lord’s demands. But He expects the *ultimate* level of commitment from us. Likewise His Father had asked Abraham to offer his dearest: Isaac. This is the Father and Son with whom we have to do. His parables of Mt. 25 make the point that the rejected will be surprised at how hard He turns out to be: they didn’t expect Him to judge sins of omission so seriously. Likewise the man who held on to his talent of the Truth seemed surprised when the Lord said that He expected more. The foolish virgins were likewise shocked to be told that actually they didn’t know their Lord at all.

The Old Testament also reveals a gracious God who in some ways is a more demanding Lord than we might think. Reflect how Ahab was rebuked for not killing Benhadad, in obedience

to God's command (1 Kings 20:35,42). But Ahab is not recorded as ever having been told to do this. What he had been told was that Yahweh would deliver the Syrians into his hand (:28). Presumably, God expected Ahab to infer from this that he should kill Benhadad; and rebuked him for his lack of perception, just as Jesus rebuked the disciples after the resurrection. The New Testament also has examples of our being expected to deduce things which at first glance we might find somewhat demanding. 1 Cor. 14:21 rebukes the Corinthians for speaking to each other in languages which their brethren didn't understand. Paul considered that they were immature in their understanding because they hadn't perceived that Is. 28:11,12 states that it will be the Gentile non-believers who will speak to God's people in a language they don't understand.

The Harder Side Of Christ

There was a harder side to Christ. He was a demanding Lord. He told His disciples to forsake what they had and follow Him. They did. And apparently with no prefatory praise or introduction, He called them " ye of little faith...fools...slow of heart to believe" . Of course, He may have prefaced these criticisms with something softer (cp. His letters to the churches); but the Spirit has preferred not to record it. Often His parables warn that those who think He will understand their weakness, those who are too familiar with His softer side. The parable of the great supper records men explaining to Christ why they can't *immediately* respond to Him, although they want to when it's more convenient: " I have bought a piece of ground, *and must needs* go and see it...I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them...I have married a wife, therefore *I cannot come*" (Lk. 14:18-20). The implication is that they assumed that the servant calling them to the wedding (i.e. Christ) would understand that their excuses were quite reasonable; the man who pleaded marriage as his excuse would have been alluding to the Law's provision to have time off from the Lord's duties on account of marriage (Dt. 24:5). All these reasons were assumed to be quite reasonable, and the men sound as if they were confident that *of course* Christ would understand. The parable of the King's son records excuses which are more evidently unreasonable; some said they were going to work on their farm, when actually the banquet was going to be held in the evening (Mt. 22:5). There is a connection with the parable of Lk. 14, where the excuses seem more reasonable. But the similarity shows that as far as the Lord is concerned, *any* excuse, evidently irrelevant or apparently reasonable, is just not acceptable to Him.

But the point of the parables is that as far as Christ is concerned, these were all just empty excuses, even the excuse that appeared to be based on a past concession to weakness. He's saying that the invitation to His Kingdom, to His very own wedding, must take priority over all the everyday things of human experience which we assume are so justified, and which we assume He will quite understand if we put in front of Him and His call. *Every reader* ought to feel uncomfortable on considering this. It's this category of Christian who will be so surprised when they are rejected: " Lord, Lord, open to us....When saw we thee hungry...?" (Mt. 25:11,44). They thought they knew Him, but He has never known them (Mt. 7:23). This idea of surprise at rejection is to be connected with that of brethren thinking (mistakenly) that of course the Lord understands their putting His call into second place. He is a Lord they hardly know in this life, despite what they think, and He will be the same at judgment day. There's a point to be made from the way they are so confident they know Christ, but He says He has never known them. They didn't live up to the demanding Lord they served. The idea of a two-way relationship with Him was evidently foreign to them. They thought their theoretical knowledge and outward works meant that Christ knew them. The worrying thing is, how many of us feel we have a two-way relationship with the Lord?

Serving For Nothing

The Lord's parables set a high standard of commitment, without which, it is implied, the attainment of the Kingdom is impossible. Thus Mt. 12:12 likens the Kingdom to a city which can only be entered by "the violent (taking) it by force". This is the language of crack storm troopers forcing their way in to a barricaded city. And according to the Lord, every one of us who hopes to enter the Kingdom must have this spirit. We must force our way in. What we may think of as righteousness which touches His heart is nothing more than the monotonous ploughing of a field, according to Lk. 17:8-10. This extraordinary story is so simple: A master doesn't thank his slave for ploughing all day. When he comes home in the evening, the slave's job is to get the Master's food ready, and then when the Master has been looked after, he can get himself something. The Master has no need to thank (Gk. *charis*, s.w. to give "grace") the slave, and the slave expects nothing else. This is how the Lord sees our works; He expects us to serve Him for nothing, because of our role as His slaves, and not because we expect any gratitude, recognition or reward. We serve because we are His slaves.

The parable teaches that absolute obedience should be the norm of our lives, not the exception, and that this is only what our Master demands and expects. From the way He told the story, Christ framed our sympathy to be with the slave. But His point is that when we have done all, worked all day and then gone the extra mile in the evening, we should still feel unprofitable slaves, slaves who aren't much profit to their Master. The passive, unspoken *acceptance* seen between Master and slave in the parable should be seen between us and the Lord. There is no attempt by the Lord to ameliorate the Master : slave figure; "Ye call me master and Lord, and ye say well, for so I am" (Jn. 13:13). And yet we are told that at the judgment we will receive "praise of God" (1 Cor. 4:5). This can not, therefore, be praise of our efforts at obedience; it will be praise for the status we are in on account of being in Christ, being counted as righteous as Him. The parable was spoken in the context of the disciples thinking that God would be very happy with them if they forgave their brother seven times a day (Lk. 17:3-6). But the Lord is replying that things like this, which to us may seem going more than the extra mile, should be the norm; such heights of spirituality are only the daily ploughing of the field, and are only the obvious minimum which Christ accepts. He won't shew us grace ("thank") for doing this- with the implication that His grace is totally undeserved, not related to our forgiveness of others or other acts of obedience. The story paints the Master as being rather ungrateful and hard, to see his servant work so hard, then go the extra mile, and not utter a word of thanks. And the Lord is saying: 'Yes, to the natural mind, that's how I am'.

Christ says that the slave will not expect the Master to say to him "Sit down to meat", but will expect to be told, tired as he is, to gird himself and serve his Master (Lk. 17:7,8). The Lord's words here are surely intended to recall when He said that in the Kingdom He would make us each sit down to meat and come forth and serve us (Lk. 12:37). The point of the connection is to show that Christ's treatment of us in the Kingdom *will* be different from that of an ordinary Master, but we really, honestly shouldn't expect it; we should serve because we are His servants, not expecting any praise or response from him. As it happens, He will give us all this in the Kingdom, but we shouldn't expect this at all. As the slave would have been dumbfounded if his Master did this, so should our response be in the Kingdom. What makes it difficult is that we *know* our Master is like this, that He's a most unusual Lord, one who washes our feet; and the extraordinary relationship we have with Him ought to make us eagerly desire to show a similar service to our brethren (Jn. 13:13,14).

We are *expected* by Christ to realize that our relationship with Him means total commitment to His cause. In this sense Jesus is a demanding Lord. Thus when He gave the talents to His servants, He doesn't tell them to trade with them; it seems that the one talent man is making this point when he says 'You gave me your money to look after, and I looked after it, I didn't steal it; you're unreasonable to think I should have done anything else with it, you're expecting what you didn't give'. And the Lord is; He expects that if we realize we have the honour of knowing His Truth, we should get on and do something with it, not just keep it until He comes back. He doesn't have to ask us to do this; He takes it as being obvious. The anger of the rejected man comes over as genuine; he really can't understand his Master. He's done what he was asked, and now he's condemned because he didn't do something extra. He was a Lord that man never knew- until all too late. You can imagine how you'd feel if someone gives you some money to look after, and then expects you to have doubled it, although he didn't ask you to do anything with it. Likewise the command to take up the cross daily is amplified by three small parables, one of which says that the believer is like salt, but salt is no good if it has lost its saltiness (Lk. 14:27,34). What to us is the great height of carrying Christ's cross is seen by Him as being as usual and expected as salt being salty.

Finally. The harder side of the Father and the Lord Jesus should actually serve as an attraction to the serious believer. Peter knew that if it really was the Lord Jesus out there on the water, then He would bid him walk on the water to Him. Peter knew his Lord, and the sort of things He would ask men to do- the very hardest things for them in their situation. He knew how Jesus could be a demanding Lord. Jeremiah "knew that this was the word of the Lord" when he was asked to do something so humanly senseless- to buy property when he was in prison, when the land was clearly about to be overrun by the Babylonians (Jer. 31:8). When Jeremiah had earlier found the curses for disobedience recorded in the book of the Law which had been lost, He 'ate them', those words of cursings were " the joy and rejoicing of mine heart" - they so motivated him (Jer. 15:16 = 2 Chron. 34:18-21). When Ananias and Sapphira were slain by the Lord, fear came upon " as many as heard these things" . Many would have thought His attitude hard; this man and woman had sold their property and given some of it (a fair percentage, probably, to make it look realistic) to the Lord's cause. And then He slew them. But just afterwards, " believers were the more added to the Lord" (Acts 5:12,14). The Lord's harder side didn't turn men away from Him; rather did it bring them to Him. The balance between His utter grace, the way (e.g.) He marvelled at men's puny faith, and His harder side, is what makes His character so utterly magnetic and charismatic in the ultimate sense. Think of how He beheld the rich man and loved Him, and yet at the same time was purposefully demanding: He told Him to sell all He had and give it to beggars. Not to the work of the ministry, but to beggars, many of whom one would rightly be cynical of helping. It was a large demand, the Lord didn't make it to everyone, and He knew He was touching the man's weakest point. If the Lord had asked that the man's wealth be given to Him, he may have agreed. But to beggars.... And yet the Lord made this heavy demand with a deep love for the man.

3-20 Parables About The Cross

It is clear enough that the parables are indeed the self-revelation of the Lord Jesus. It is noticeable that there is a relative absence of direct comment upon His future sacrifice. It's as if it would have been altogether too simplistic for the Lord of Heaven and earth to repeatedly tell us details of His supreme work. He was more interested in revealing His attitude to us than in giving us insight into the agonies of His final sacrifice- agonies which He surely knew we would never fully grasp, this side of the Kingdom.

Belief In Victory

One reason for this was that the Lord was absolutely sure that He would be victorious on the cross; His parables speak of our responsibilities and blessings on account of what He knew He would achieve for us. Thus the Master in the parable is able to remonstrate with the unforgiving servant: "I forgave thee all that debt" (Mt. 18:32). The Lord's assumption was that He would attain our forgiveness on account of successfully enduring the cross. Yet He triumphed through His faith; although He was all too aware of the human possibility of failure, He believed He wouldn't fail, He made use of the constant encouragement of the word to this end. He described Himself as the Lord of the servants, and also as the King (e.g. Mt. 18:23 cp. 31- there are other similar parables)- even before His cross. He had such confidence that He would be crowned as a result of His future cross. The tenses in Greek can be used very exactly (unlike Hebrew); it was quite within the ability of the Lord to build into His parables the concept of future Kingship. He could have implied 'When I'm King, I'll judge like this'. But instead He saw Himself as already having overcome. "Be of good cheer, I have (already)overcome the world...now I go my way to him that sent me (bypassing the cross in His words)...I have glorified thee...I have finished the work thou gavest me to do" (Jn. 16:33,5; 17:4); these are only a few samples of the Lord's remarkable confidence that He would overcome. This confidence is reflected in the parables. He was practising His own preaching concerning believing that we have already received what we ask for. No doubt His words recorded in Jn. 15-17 and the parables which reflected this confidence came back to Him as He struggled to quell His crisis of doubt in Gethsemane.

The Samaritan Saviour

Yet there are a few insights into how the Lord saw His cross. The parable of the good Samaritan explains how Christ took compassion on the stricken spiritual state of us His people, picked us up, made Himself vulnerable to attack by placing the man on His donkey, and caused us to be fully healed. The Samaritan was less vulnerable than the robbed man, on account of having a donkey. But he made himself even more vulnerable than the robbed man had been, in order to take him to the inn. The picture of the wounded man straddled over the donkey and the Samaritan walking patiently alongside shows what easy prey they would have been. The whole process of the man's redemption by this Samaritan is an account of the cross of Christ (not least the pouring in of wine and oil). The implication is that through seeking to save us, Christ made Himself more vulnerable than He would have been if He sought only His own salvation. And the Samaritan's speed of progress was more than halved; he had to walk rather than ride, keeping the wounded man balanced on the donkey. This parable seems to reveal that Christ realized at least in some abstract sense that His concern for us in some ways made it more difficult for Him; although the reality was that the motivation for His victory was largely due to His sense of responsibility for us.

The idea of him taking care for the man is expressed in the language of Ex. 21:19, which says that if a man wounds another, "he shall pay...and shall cause him to be thoroughly healed". This somewhat odd allusion (at first sight) surely indicates that the Lord took upon Himself the full blame for our stricken condition, presumably in the sense that as the second Adam He took upon Himself the guilt of Adam. This is why there are so many connections between His death and the effects of Adam's sin (e.g. the crown of thorns, the Garden etc.). The way Christ compared Himself to a Samaritan, half Jew and half Gentile, shows that especially on the cross, this is how He felt. He was mindful of both Jewish and Gentile aspects of His

future body as He died. The Jews (and His own brothers, Ps. 69:8) treated Him as half Gentile (from a Roman soldier, the Talmud claims).

The Saviour Shepherd

Jn. 10:12 implies that Christ, the good shepherd, saw the wolf coming. He didn't flee, but fought with this ferocious beast until the death. He says that if He had not done this, the sheep would be scattered. The struggle between Christ and the devil / flesh was therefore at its most intense on the cross, in His time of dying. The cross was not only a continuation of His struggle with the (Biblical) devil. It was an especially intensified struggle; and the Lord foresaw this fight coming. There is an element of unreality in this story that serves to make two powerful points. Firstly, no normal shepherd would give his life in protecting his sheep. The near fanaticism of this shepherd is also found in Am. 8:4, which describes the Lord as taking out of the mouth of the lion the legs or piece of ear which remains of the slain sheep; such is the shepherd's desperate love for the animal that now is not. The love of Christ for us on the cross, the intensity and passion of it, is quite outside any human experience. Hence the command to copy His love is a new commandment. And secondly, wolves don't normally act in the way the story says. They will only fight like this when they are cornered, and they aren't so vicious. But the point the Lord is making is crucial to us: the devil, the power of sin in our natures, is far more powerful than we think, and the struggle against it on the cross was far far harder than we would think.

And there's a more tragic point. In the short term, the sheep were scattered by the wolf, even though Christ died so this wouldn't happen. And Christ knew in advance that this would happen (Is. 53:6; Mk. 14:27; Jn. 16:32). The Lord faced His final agony with the knowledge that in the short term, what He was dying in order to stop (i.e. the scattering of the sheep) wouldn't work. The sheep would still be scattered, and He knew that throughout the history of His church they would still keep wandering off and getting lost (according to Lk. 15:3-6). Yet He died for us from the motive of ultimately saving us from the effect of doing this. He had clearly thought through the sheep / shepherd symbolism. Unity and holding on to the faith were therefore what He died to achieve (cp. Jn. 17:21-23); our disunity and apostasy, each turning to his own, is a denial of the Lord's sufferings. And this is why it causes Him such pain.

The Binding Of Satan

Of especial interest is the parable of the strong man being bound, because through this parable the Lord outlines what He felt His victory on the cross would mean for us. And surely we ought to be all ears in response to that.

The idea of Christ binding satan (the "strong man"), stealing his goods and sharing them with His followers is a picture of His victory on the cross [\(1\)](#). It is full of allusion to Is. 53:12, which says that on account of the fact that Christ would pour out His soul unto death and bear our sins, "he shall divide the spoil with the strong (Heb: 'those that are bound')". With the same thought in mind, Paul spoke of how through the cross, Christ "spoiled principalities and powers" (Col. 2:15). It may be that this is one of many examples of the New Testament writers thinking in a Hebrew way, despite writing in Greek. "Principalities and powers" is perhaps an intensive plural, referring to the great principality and power, i.e. Satan. The way He 'triumphed over them in himself' (Gk. + AVmg.) would certainly make more sense if they referred to the Biblical devil / satan which was overcome within Christ (cp. the language of

Heb. 2:14-18; 1 Pet. 2:24). Eph. 2:15,16 appears to be parallel to Col. 2:15. It speaks of how Christ "abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments...for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; and that He might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby". Col. 2:15 speaks of the Lord on the cross as the victorious champion, killing "principalities and powers" and then triumphing over them by sharing their spoils with his soldiers. Eph. 2:15 speaks of Christ on the cross "slaying the enmity" (the Biblical Devil) and achieving peace and reconciliation for all those within His body.

Yet in the immediate context, the Lord is offering an explanation of why His miracles proved He was the Messiah. He hadn't yet died on the cross; but He was doing the works which were possible as a result of the binding of Satan which He would then achieve. This is yet another example of the Lord's confidence that He would overcome, and God going along with Him in this. The Lord's miracles were a physical foretaste of the great spiritual blessings which would be made available as a result of the binding of Satan by Christ's death and resurrection.

The Spoils Of Satan

The "spoils" of Satan are those things which he has taken away; surely the spoils taken from Satan by Christ refer to the righteousness which our nature takes away from us. Lk. 11:22 adds another detail to the story. The "armour" of Satan which he depends upon is taken away by Christ on the cross, and then Satan is bound, and his spoils shared out. The armour of Satan is the antithesis of the armour of righteousness (Eph. 6:11,13). As the Kingdom of God has a God who dwells in darkness, a Prince, an armour, a Christ, a dominion, a will and spirit, fruits, rewards etc., so does the kingdom of (the personified) Satan. The armour of righteousness is the fruit of the Spirit, the righteous characteristics of the Spirit. The armour of Satan is the fruits of the flesh nature. These have been taken away by Christ, He has bound Satan, and therefore what Satan has robbed us of, the fruits of righteousness, his spoils, can be taken at will by the Lord Jesus. We have shown that Christ was alluding to Is. 53:12, which says that through the cross, Christ divides the spoil with the bound ones, i.e. us. In this lies a paradox. Binding is associated with sin (Ps. 68:6; Is. 61:1; Lam. 1:14; Lk. 13:16). We are bound, in many ways, intrinsically limited by our own natures. Only at the second coming will Satan be bound, i.e. the Lord's personal achievement will be physically shared with the world (Rev. 20:2). Yet we, the bound ones, are given the goods which the Lord personally took away from the bound Satan. Those goods are the righteous attributes which our natures stop us possessing as we should.

The dividing of the spoils to us by the victorious Lord (Lk. 11:22; Is. 53:12) recalls how the Lord divided all His goods between His servants (Mt. 25:14), the dividing of all the Father's goods between the sons (representing the good and bad believers, Lk. 15:12). We have elsewhere shown that these goods refer to the various aspects of the supreme righteousness of Christ which are divided between the body of Christ (2). The spoils divided to us by the Lord are the various aspects of righteousness which He took for Himself from Satan. The picture of a bound strong man having his house ransacked before his eyes carries with it the idea of suspense, of daring, of doing something absolutely impossible. And so the idea of Christ really taking the righteousness which the Satan of our very natures denies us, and giving these things to us, is almost too much to believe.

Lone Hero

It is normally the fellow-soldiers who share the spoils (cp. Heb. 7:4). But we didn't even fight; the spoils are divided amongst the bound ones (Is. 53:12 Heb.). Satan in general is still unbound (cp. Rev. 20:2). Christ bound the Satan within Himself personally, and took the spoils of victory for Himself. Col. 2:15 says that Christ "spoiled" as a result of His victory on the cross; and the Greek specifically means 'to completely divest for oneself'. He is being painted as the lone hero who took it all for Himself; of the people there was none with Him in His great battle on the cross (Is. 63:3). And indeed, He was the lone hero. But the point is that He has shared with us the spoils of righteousness which He took for Himself as a result, even though we are not worthy to receive them. Seeing the teaching of the Lord is just outline principle, it is evident that through His death He gained possession of absolute righteousness, and then shared this with us.

In the first century, the outward demonstration of this was in the miraculous gifts of the Spirit. "He led captivity captive (more language of the heroic victor), and gave gifts unto men", the miraculous gifts, in the first century context (Eph. 4:8,11). But what was taken away from Satan was not only power over illness. If this was the main meaning of Satan being bound and his spoils shared with us, then it would follow that the effect of Christ's binding of Satan was only in the first century; for those miraculous gifts of the Spirit are no longer available; illness still triumphs over God's people. The spoils of Satan refer to the righteousness which Satan limits and denies. It is this which has been taken from him, and divided to us all as a result of the cross. The miracles of the first century were a physical reflection of this, just as the rending of the temple veil and resurrection of some dead saints was a physical foretaste of the spiritual possibilities opened up by the Lord's death.

The Lord's Gifts

There are many references to the spiritual blessings which are even now mediated to us (as the whole body of Christ) on account of the Lord's death; we (as a community) are given peace and "eternal life" (Jn. 14:27; 17:2; 1 Jn. 5:11), knowledge (2 Cor. 4:6), wisdom (Eph. 1:17; James 1:15), peace (2 Thess. 3:16), understanding (1 Cor. 2:12; 2 Tim. 2:7), love in our hearts (Rom. 5:5), grace (Eph. 4:7), comfort (2 Thess. 2:16), righteousness (Rom. 5:16,17), confidence (2 Tim. 1:7), sexual self restraint (1 Cor. 7:7). All the different aspects of the 100% righteousness of our Lord, all His goods, the spoils He personally took from Satan, are divided up amongst ourselves, some having spiritual possibilities in one area, others in another. As a community we are counted as if we have overcome the world, overcome Satan, as Christ did, although on a human level we are still bound (Jn. 16:33 cp. 1 Jn. 2:13,14; 5:4). Only at the day of judgment will we have overcome all (Rev. 21:7 cp. Lk. 11:22 s.w.), but we are treated as if we have already done so.

Grasping this extensive theme helps explain the deep sense of paradox which is central to all serious self-examination. We are counted righteous, we are given spiritual gifts of righteousness now, and our self-examination reveals this to us; but we are expected to develop them (according to the parable of the pounds). Yet we also see that we are pathetically bound by our Satan, somehow held back from that life of righteousness which we would fain achieve. All these things were deeply foreseen and appreciated by the Lord when He constructed this parable of binding Satan. Christ in His own life has overcome Satan, and has graciously shared the various aspects of righteousness with the whole of His body. This is the very idea of the body of Christ; between us, over time, we will approximate to the perfect reflection of our Lord. We have each been given different aspects to develop, different parts

of His personality. This explains the difference in emphasis which can be observed within the different parts of the present body, and also in the history of the body over time.

When we as a community finally grow up into Him, "unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13), the whole process of Christ-manifestation (and thereby God manifestation) will be complete. This means that the speed of spiritual development in the latter day body of Christ will determine the exact date of the Lord's return. We are (hopefully and prayerfully) just adding the final touches to the full reflection of the Lord's body. The aspects of Christ which we as a community need to develop in these last days are presumably aspects which earlier generations were unable or not called to achieve. For example, it was simply impossible for earlier generations to do much to achieve the unity of the body. Now, with the possibility of the whole world-wide family being in close contact with each other, with the breakdown of distance and language barriers, it is a real possibility that the body should be one in a manner which was simply impossible to previous generations.

It seems to me, from what knowledge I have of myself and of our community, that many of these things which Christ died to achieve are tragically rejected, at best viewed suspiciously, by 21st century believers. The idea of gifts of righteousness, of being given something spiritual for nothing, of each only reflecting aspects of Christ rather than complete personal perfection, of striving for unity in the body...all this is almost anathema to some. Yet it's anathema to our very natures, it's against the grain of each of us. Yet I submit, I trust with at least some genuine humility, that the things discussed in the above paragraphs are all utterly fundamental to the cross of Christ; He died in order to achieve these very things.

Notes

(1) The idea of binding the strong man must surely look back to Samson. The language can't just be accidentally similar (cp. Jud. 16:21). This means that the Lord saw Samson as the very epitome of Satan, even though ultimately he was a man of faith (Heb. 11:32). Thus the Spirit doesn't forget a man's weakness, even though ultimately he may be counted righteous.

(2) See my 'The Personal Lord' in *From Milk To Meat*.

3-21 Parables Of The Kingdom

The Mustard Seed

There are a number of insights throughout the parables into how the Lord perceived His future Kingdom. Significantly, His emphasis in the parables of the Kingdom is upon our spiritual status then, rather than on the physical wonders which His reign will bring on the earth. He foresaw how although our faith is so puny now, as a mustard seed, we will be those who will be as a solid tree, a real place of refuge, to the nations of the Millennium (Mt. 13:31,32 = Ez. 17:23,24). Just a very small amount of real faith during this life will enable us to move "this mountain", surely referring to Mount Zion in the immediate context (Mt.

17:20). The idea of Mount Zion being moved sends the mind to Zech. 14:4,5, describing how Mount Zion will be moved at the Lord's return; and also to Ps. 125:1, which speaks of how they who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be removed; and yet Christ said we *will* remove it by prayer. The point of these allusions is surely to show that real faith will bring about the coming of the Kingdom, which is a totally super-human achievement; the unshakeableness of Mount Zion is likened to the solidity of true faith. The Lord's point seems to be that if we truly believe, then the coming of the Kingdom will be brought about by our faith; the outcome of our faith in this life will be seen in the Kingdom. But what our faith will achieve in the Kingdom will be hugely out of proportion to what it really is now.

But there is another way to read Mt. 17:20: " If ye have (now) faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall (in the Kingdom) say to this mountain (of Zion), Remove hence..." ; as if in the Kingdom we will be control of the physical world as the Lord was even in His mortality. In this case, His commanding of the sea and waves will be shared by us in the Kingdom; not just sea and waves, but mountains too (Mt. 8:27).

Handing Back The Money

The parables of the Kingdom speak of the eternal consequences of the judgment. The Lord will require His own at the judgment (Lk. 19:23). This doesn't mean, as the one talent man thought, that Christ will require us to give back to Him the basic doctrines of the Gospel which we were given at conversion. The Greek means to exact regularly, in an ongoing sense (s.w. Lk. 3:13); Strong defines it as meaning " to perform repeatedly...not a single act" . When the Lord examines our achievements at the judgment, He will expect to keep on receiving the result of what we have achieved for Him in this life. This is the ultimate encouragement for us in our preaching and encouraging of others, as well as ourselves; what we achieve now will yield eternal, continual fruit to the Lord.

But Mt. 25:27 says that at the judgment, the Lord will *receive* back His own. Strong defines this as " to carry off, away from harm" (the same word is used in Heb. 11:19 re. Abraham *receiving* Isaac from the dead). There is the suggestion that the Truth which the Lord has given us is valuable to Him, and He fears our losing it; those who lose the faith lose the personal possession of the Lord Jesus. But at the judgment, when we hand it back to the Lord, He (not to say, we) will have that deep knowledge that now we can't fail Him any more, we no longer have the possibility of causing harm and loss to the treasured wealth which has been entrusted to us.

The Limitation Of Immortality

There is a theme presented in the parables of the Kingdom which one is cautious to develop. But with child-like enthusiasm to enter deeper into the Hope of the Kingdom, I offer the following point for consideration: The Angels are in some ways limited, in power and understanding, despite possessing God's nature. It's more than likely that we in the Kingdom will eternally grow in knowledge (and perhaps power?) as the Angels do [\(1\)](#). This lack of full knowledge and comprehension is hinted at in the parables:

- " They said unto him, Lord, he hath ten pounds" (Lk. 19:25) suggests that " them that stood by" somehow questioned the Lord's judgment; their sense of equality was not that of their Lord. They felt that the gloriously strong brother with his wonderful reward didn't need it to be made even more wonderful. " Them that stood by" could refer to the Angels, or to the way

in which the judgment will in some sense take place in the presence of all the believers (2). The fact is, even with God's nature, it will be difficult to appreciate the principles of judgment which the Lord uses; and so how much more difficult is it today!

- Those hired into the vineyard first " supposed (on judgment day) that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny. And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house...but he answered one of them (what's the significance of this?) and said, Friend (a description of the faithful, Jn. 15:15; James 2:23), I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is...I will give unto this last, even as unto thee" (Mt. 20:10-15). If the penny represents salvation, the harder workers only started questioning once they saw, to their amazement, the weaker and shorter workers receiving a penny. They received the promised reward of salvation, but couldn't understand the principles on which the Lord rewarded the weaker servants. If the hard working faithful will have a problem with this even at the judgment, how much more now?

Taken individually, none of these points from the parables of the Kingdom is very convincing. But put together, I suggest we see the emergence of a theme. It may be that these are the thoughts which pass through the minds of the responsible as they watch the judgment process; for it seems that in some sense it will be public.

Notes

(1) I have outlined the Biblical basis for this in *The Last Days* Chapter 27 (London: Pioneer, 1992).

(2) See *Parables Of Judgment*.

4: The Parable Of The Sower

A Vital Parable

The records of this parable have a common three part sequence: firstly, the actual parable, secondly a discussion concerning the principles of Christ's parables, and finally our Lord's interpretation of the sower parable. The fact that the explanation concerning the importance of parables occurs in the sower context suggests that Christ saw this parable as an epitome of all those he told. The principle of interpreting each major element of the parable within a similar context is eloquently demonstrated by the Lord's unravelling of his story about the sower. Because of this, it is understandable that Jesus should be so concerned at the disciples' inability to grasp this principle: "Know ye not this parable? and how then will ye know all parables?" (Mk.4:13). Our Lord's enthusiasm for us to interpret the sower parable for ourselves comes out well in Lk.8:8: "When he had said these things (the parable with the interpretation), he *cried*, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear". The disciples' response "What *might* (indicating intellectual desperation?) this parable be?" (Lk.8:9) would have been a cutting anti-climax for the Lord after his impassioned plea. As a further motivation to understand this parable, Jesus comments that "many prophets and righteous men (who had spent a lifetime associated with God's word) have desired to see (understand) those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to *hear* those things which ye *hear*, and have not heard them. *Hear* ye therefore the parable of the sower" (Mt.13:17,18). The things which those Old Testament worthies so desired to understand were the principles concerning the operation of God's word which the sower parable explains. Grasping the fact that our understanding of these principles is something that Enoch, Samuel, David, Jeremiah etc. *longed* to be honoured with, but were denied, should give a special verve to our desire

to "hear...therefore the parable of the sower". Jesus cited correctly understanding this parable as an example of "more abundance" being given to those who already had a basic grasp of the Gospel (Mt.13:12).

The Sower And The Seed

"The seed is the word of God" (Lk.8:11), i.e. the word of the Gospel of the Kingdom (Mt.13:19). The parable gives the impression that the ground was in a certain condition when the seed was first sown; there seems no hint at the possibility of changing the ground, although we will see later that there is a sense in which this is possible. The stony ground, for example, is in that state as soon as the seed lands upon it. It seems that Jesus is showing us how God looks down upon the preaching of the Gospel to various people, seeing that He speaks about things which are future as if they are already (Rom.4:17). He knows the type of ground which each of us will ultimately be. Therefore, as far as God is concerned, we are good ground, or whatever, at the time of our first encounter with the Gospel, even if we are initially stony or thistle-filled.

The types of ground clearly represent those who hear the word, sown by Christ as the sower. However, our relationship with Jesus through his word is not confined to our initial receipt of the basic Gospel. The sower kept on sowing (so the Greek tenses imply), showing that all through our spiritual lives we continually hear the word and have the opportunity to respond to it in the various ways which the sower parable describes. Thus the parable finds just as much fulfilment at a fraternal gathering where the word of Christ is spoken, as at an open air preaching meeting or in a mass distribution of tracts. Sometimes a facet of God's word takes a permanent hold on part of our life, bringing forth regular spiritual fruit in this aspect; other things which are taught by the word go only skin deep, and for various reasons "bring no fruit to perfection".

It should be noted that "the word" in the parable evidently refers to the word of the Gospel. This shows that the powerful, new life-creating power of God's word is through an understanding of the basic principles of the Gospel. Everything which we read from the word is part of the Gospel in this sense; our responsibility to God does not therefore just reach a fixed point at baptism, after having known the basic principles, but increases with our continued understanding of the word. In this sense there is no division between the "first principles" and the strong meat of the word. The "strong meat" is related to the first principles. Abstract, Bible-related philosophy which is unrelated to our first principles will therefore not result in real spiritual growth. It is for this reason that other churches which hold false basic principles are unable to grow spiritually from their Bible study. A proper appreciation of this would silence the reasoning that 'people in the other churches' seem so 'spiritual', therefore their doctrinal basis cannot be fundamentally wrong.

On the contrary, "seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth (accepting the basic doctrines)...see that ye (continue) being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God...and this is the word which by the Gospel (true basic doctrines) is preached unto you" (1 Pet.1:22-25). Note the continuous tense of "is", remembering that Peter is writing to those already converted. The once off act of intercourse and begetting, whereby the seed or sperm initiates new life, is here spoken of in the continuous sense. Similarly, a sower sowing seed is a once-off act, yet the parable has an ongoing application. Human "seed" and begetting is "corruptible" (1 Pet.1:23)- i.e. the offspring does not have the exact character of the person from whom the seed originated. Yet God's seed is "incorruptible" in that it will eventually result in our being brought forth in the exact image of God after the judgment, when we are fully born of Spirit nature. This is because "the word (seed) of God...liveth and abideth for ever", i.e. God's word can have constant intercourse with us, constantly creating us after the image of our spiritual Father. In like manner our relationship with Christ throughout the eternal ages of the Kingdom is described in terms of a wedding feast and subsequent consummation. Both those actions are desperately finite and time-bounded in our experience; but the intensity of fulfilment of those moments will go with us throughout the Kingdom. There will not be a peak of joy experienced at our initial acceptance at judgment which then slightly tails off; this will be a constant joy and level of fulfilment such as we can only momentarily experience now.

"This is the word which by the Gospel is *preached* unto you" shows that the language of preaching can be used concerning our relationship with God's word both before and after baptism. Likewise, the sower parable has dual reference to the preaching of God's word to both believers and unbelievers.

The relationship between the basic doctrines of the Gospel and "the word of God" which comes to us through them has a number of practical implications. Study of the basic doctrines should be a regular feature amongst us; weekly Bible lectures provide an ideal opportunity for this. It has been correctly noted that "a good lecture does us as much good as an exhortation". Those who bleat "But we *know* all this!" evidently fail to understand the relationship between spiritual growth and the fundamental elements of the Gospel. Those who give the public Bible addresses need to spare the time to make their presentation flexible, so that in the absence of those who are unfamiliar with basic doctrine, the ecclesia can be led into a deeper analysis of those doctrines, whilst drawing associated devotional lessons. A few simple examples should make the point:

Subject	Doctrine	Analysis	Devotional
God	Unity of God	Corporeality of God; His nature; God manifestation	Personal relationship with God as a Father; the wonder of it.
Jesus	His human nature	The Divine and human sides of Jesus.	Reality of forgiveness; Jesus' sympathy for us.
Devil	Bible teaching contrasted with false conceptions.	Job's satan- an Angel?	God the source of our trials- no other power can touch us.
Death	Soul/ spirit;	Differences of soul and spirit "spirits of just men"?	Reality of resurrection; personal recognition in the Kingdom?

Primary Application

The Gospel records give more information about the day on which Christ told the sower parable than concerning almost any other in his ministry, with the exception of the crucifixion (compare Mt.12:22-13:23; Lk.11:27; Mk.4:10). Various types of people heard his words; the immediate context in Mt.13:2 is that "great multitudes were gathered together unto him". The parable of the differing types of ground which were for the most part unresponsive to the seed therefore refer to the various reception given to Christ's sowing when he first "went forth to sow" in his ministry.

Jesus spoke the parable of the sower so that the Jews "by hearing...shall hear, and...not understand" (Mt.13:14), which is quoting from Is. 6:9,10 concerning Israel hearing the preaching of Jesus during his ministry. This would explain the present tenses in Mk.4:14-20: "These *are* they by the way side...these *are* they...which *are* sown...". The picture of fowls coming down to take away the seed is firmly rooted in a host of Old Testament passages which speak of fowls descending on apostate Israel (Is.18:6; Jer.7:33; 15:3; 16:4; 19:7; 34:20). These birds taking away the seed are interpreted as "the wicked one" (the Biblical devil) 'catching away' the word. There must be a thought connection here with Jesus' comment that from him who would not understand the sower parable "shall be *taken away* even that he hath" (Mt.13:12). Those who would not make the mental effort to grapple with Christ's parable had what understanding they did have snatched away by the Jewish devil. "The wicked one" responsible for this easily connects with "the devil" of the parable of the tares which follows; this parable has frequently been interpreted with reference to Jewish false teachers of the first century. "The wicked one...catcheth away" the seed/word, as the Jewish wolf "catcheth" the sheep

(Mt.13:19; Jn.10:12). This association of the first century Jewish system with the wolf/ wild beast/ devil/ wicked one is probably continued by some of the beasts of Revelation having a similar Jewish application in the first century.

In his justification of confusing the Jews through the sower parable, Jesus twice lamented that they did not *understand* (Mt.13:13,14). He was basically saying that the Jews were the bad ground in the parable; the fowls snatched away the seed because they did not *understand* (Mt.13:19). By contrast, those on the good ground *did* understand (Mt.13:23). Those who heard the word "and anon with joy receiveth it" only to later fall away (Mt.13:20,21) approximate to the Jews who initially rejoiced at the word of Christ preached by John and later Jesus himself (Jn.5:35). "The care of this world" (Mt.13:22) must primarily refer to the Jewish world. It is quite possible that our Lord's sad prophecy of the disciples being offended because of having to identify with his sufferings looked back to this parable, concerning those who impulsively respond to the word in joy, but are offended because they have no deep root (Mk.4:17 = Mk.14:27; Mt.26:31). The fact that the disciples became good ground after this encourages us that we can change the type of ground which we are on initially receiving the seed.

The practical outcome of all this is that the attitude of natural Israel to God's word and the preaching of Christ can be our attitude, if we approximate to the bad types of ground. The Jews knew some true principles, reading the word often (Acts 15:21; Jn.5:45); but they failed to let the message penetrate more than skin deep (Lk.16:29; Jn.5:39), so that the word of God meant nothing to them in practice.

It is our attitude to God's word which is the fundamental indicator of our spirituality. The sower parable teaches this by its equation of the seed/ word and the types of ground. In the next (but related) parable of the tares, "the good seed are the children of the Kingdom" (Mt.13:38)- i.e. the seed/ word is people. In the sower parable, we read of "He which received seed by the way side" (Mt.13:19), connecting the believer with a type of ground which receives the seed, whilst Lk.8:12,13 speak of the people as the seeds rather than the types of ground: "Those (seeds) by the way side are they...they on the rock are they...". Mt.13:19 speaks of people receiving seed by the way side, but Mk.4:15 likens their *heart* to the way side, where the seed was sown. In God's sight, a person *is* his heart or way of thinking (Prov.23:7); and to God, a person's attitude to the word *is* his mind. Conscious self-examination of our attitude to God's word should surely be an outcome of studying this sower parable- or, better, the parable of the types of ground.

Seeds By The Way Side

"Some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up...when any one heareth the word of the Kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart" (Mt.13:4,19).

This proves that sin, in its various manifestations as a 'devil', can be resisted through an understanding of the word. *When* there was no understanding of the word, *then* the devil came. Likewise 1 Jn.5:18-20 teaches that those who are born again by a true understanding of the word are not even touched by the "wicked one". Mere knowledge of the word will not necessarily stop the spiritual temptations; the word must be hid in the heart to stop sin (Ps.119:11); not just left on the surface of the soil. Those on the good ground both hear *and* understand it (Mt.13:23), corresponding in the first instance to those who heard the parables and understood them. There is no doubt that a degree of intellectual effort is required to understand the word, not least the parables. The Jews generally did not "hear with their ears"- they did not respond or recognize the basic message of the word, let alone go on to understand it. The fact that those by the way side *heard* the word but did not go on to understand therefore indicates that this type of ground refers to those who are in some sense knowers of the truth. We will see by and by that there is good reason to apply all the types of ground to those who in some way respond to the Gospel, rather than to the world at large.

A closer look at the Greek suggests more reason for thinking that those by the way side were once believers, rather than just fascinated receivers of a preaching tract. The fowls "devoured...up" the seed by the way side, the Greek meaning literally 'to eat down', showing that the seeds had started some paltry attempt at growth. The wicked one therefore "catcheth away" or 'pulls up' (Gk.) that which "was sown in his heart". However, the fact that "Satan cometh immediately" to do this shows that the time span is not long (Mk.4:15). It is possible that the three bad types of ground refer to the speed at

which the new convert falls away; those on the way side fall quickly, those on stony ground last a bit longer, enduring "for a time" (Mk.4:17), whilst those among thorns do actually mature, only to be choked by their surroundings.

The reason for the way side growth being so short lived was that the seed was "trodden down" (Lk.8:5). This is a Biblical idiom for disdain and contempt (Jud.5:21; Is.14:19; 18:7; 28:3; Dan.8:13; Mic.7:10). A half hearted response to the word, not really taking the truth seriously, is effectively to tread it down in contempt. Yet such is the word's power that even a partial response to it results in some growth- although in the final analysis, even this is unacceptable. Mark's record goes on to include the parable of the birds living in the big mustard tree, soon after this of the sower. The tiny grain of mustard seed "is sown in the earth", connecting with the sowing of the word/ seed. If it is in the right ground, it develops into a huge tree "so that the fowls of the air may lodge under the shadow of it" (Mk.4:31,32). The connection with the wicked "fowls of the air" in the sower parable is evidently intentional. Surely the message is that if we will only let the word/ seed develop in our lives, those things which threaten to take away our faith (i.e. the devil/ fowls) will then be completely subordinate to us. Yet that tiny seed of the word is so easy to despise, its potential power so hard to imagine and believe.

The fowls taking away the unfruitful plant is the first of a number of connections with the true vine parable of Jn.15, where the ideas of Divine husbandry, fruitfulness due to the word and purging recur. In Jn.15:2 the fruitless branch is taken away by God; in the sower parable, the birds remove the fruitless plant. The conclusion is that God sends 'birds' of various kinds to remove the spiritual deadwood from His ecclesia. It is in this sense that false teaching (e.g. the Judaist "fowls" of the first century) is allowed by God. Thus Lk.8:5 literally translated speaks of "birds of Heaven".

Seeds On Stones

"Some seed fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth. And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away...he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended" (Mt.13:5,6,20,21).

Unlike the wayside ground, this person had partial understanding of the word, as well as just hearing it. He "received" the word, which a comparison of Mt.13:23 with Mk.4:20 indicates refers to understanding. The abnormal speed of growth was "*because they had no deepness of earth*". This quick springing up is interpreted by Jesus as "joy". The emotion of joy is probably one of the most deceptive. The implication is that the plant on the good ground grew up slower, therefore having a less ecstatic joy to begin with. True spiritual joy therefore takes a long time to achieve. The kind of joy Jesus speaks of here must be in some ways different from the instant joy of the man who finds the treasure of the Gospel for the first time (Mt.13:44). There *is* a place for this ecstatic joy- "unless a man is emotionally moved by the truth, he is not of the truth" (R.R.). But the stony places man failed to realize that this alone would not tide him into the Kingdom. Those who seek to keep the ecclesia on a permanent level of this ecstatic joy would do well to realize that true spiritual joy is only developed by a prolonged growth based upon the word; and this joy cannot be forced upon others. In practice, a sensitive choice of songs and hymns in ecclesial meetings could help to achieve a happy medium.

The ecstatic joy was due to having "no deepness of earth". The Greek for "deepness" is normally used concerning spiritual deepness. Ecstatic joy is more often associated with a lack of this, according to the parable, than with a depth of faith. We can have a certain joy whilst still being stony ground. By the same token, true spiritual depth will be expressed by a slow growth of true joy. We each need to ask ourselves whether our joy is really growing. "Earth" usually refers to the flesh; the seed of the word must penetrate deep within the flesh for there to be true growth and joy. The word only going skin deep will mean that there will be a lack of moisture in drought (Lk.8:6). Rain is a symbol of doctrine, i.e. the word (Dt.32:2; Is.55:10). By letting the word/ seed sink deep within our flesh, we will have more spiritual reserve of the word to draw upon in times of difficulty. There may be the implication that soon after conversion, there will be spiritual temptation- as happened to Israel after their Red Sea baptism, and as has been proved true in so many probationers.

Luke's record says that the seeds "fell upon a rock" (Lk.8:6) but failed to put down deep roots. This idea of failing to build deeply upon a rock sends the mind racing to the parable of the wise and foolish builders (Mt.7:24-28). The quick-build shack on the sand connects with the unusually fast growth of the plant on stony ground. The reason for the quick construction was a failure to hear Christ's sayings and *do* them, through hacking away at our stony heart to let the word penetrate. The same parable puts the stress on hearing and *understanding*, whilst the parallel parable speaks of hearing and *doing*. We can conclude that true intellectual understanding of the word must inevitably result in action. Having "no root in themselves" (Mk.4:17) is equated with not making the effort to hack away at our stony heart to let the word of God build a foundation. The root is therefore another symbol of word; it is quite possible to show superficial spiritual development without this root being put down at all. "The root" is a Biblical symbol for the inner self (Rom.11:16,17; Mt.3:10; Job 19:28; Is.14:29). Our very inner being, the root of our consciousness, must be the word. This is unachievable without hours of back-breaking hacking away.

The house built on sand was destroyed by a flood, an oft used type of the second coming and day of judgment. The equivalent in the sower parable is "when the sun was up...they were scattered" (Mt.13:6). The sun is a symbol of both Christ's return and also of "tribulation or persecution!" (Mt.13:21). It seems that Jesus is teaching that our response to the word now is in effect our judgment seat; if we do not properly grow by it, in time of trial (the sun rising) we will spiritually die. Therefore when "the sun of righteousness" arises (Mal.4:2) at the day of judgment, we will be "scorched" or 'burnt up' (Gk.). There are other examples of where a man's attitude to God's word in this life indicates his position at judgment day (e.g. Acts 13:46). In the same way as we call upon a reserve of word-developed spirituality in time of trial (the "moisture" of the parable), so we will at judgment day.

"Because they had no root, they withered away" (Mt.13:6) is alluded to in Jn.15:6 concerning the branches of the vine withering as a result of God's word not abiding in them. The connection between the plants of the sower parable and the branches of the vine is further evidence that the sower parable mainly concerns the response to the word of those *within* the ecclesia.

Choked By Thorns

"Some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprang up, and choked them...the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful" (Mt.13:7,22).

Thorns were symbolic of false teachers in the Old Testament ecclesia (Ez.2:6; Is.33:12-14). It is a repeated theme that thorns are devoured by fire (Ex.22:6; Ps.118:12; Ecc.7:6; Is.10:17), looking ahead to the destruction of all false elements of the ecclesia. The thorns easily equate with the tares of the next parable, which represent false teachers (primarily the Judaist infiltrators of the first century ecclesia). It would seem from this that some members of the ecclesia are never right with God, but exist purely for the spiritual trial of others; although it cannot be over-emphasized that it is quite wrong to attempt to label individuals as this 'thorn' element. Thus Jesus pointed out that grapes (the true Israel) and thorns can be apparently similar (Mt.7:16), but "Ye shall know them by their *fruits*". The thorns of the sower parable and those they influenced were "unfruitful". However, seeing that "the thorns sprang up *with it*" (Lk.8:7), there was some genuine spiritual growth, matched by the appearance of this among the thorns too. Heb.6:8 likewise speaks of the thorns as believers who grew up within the ecclesia. This indicates the dual-mindedness of those who only partially commit themselves to the word; knowledge like this should play an active part in our self-examination. Because the thorns outwardly look like true believers, having an outward appearance of spiritual growth even more zealous and strong than that of the plants which they choke, it is impossible to personally identify the "thorns"; but there can be no doubt that, according to the parable, they *must* be present among the ecclesia.

The seed "fell *among* thorns" (Mt.13:7), showing that this thorn category were already within the ecclesia when the person who was to be choked was converted. We have shown that Biblically the thorns are false teachers; yet Jesus interprets them as "the care (Gk. 'divisions'- the double mindedness of serving two masters) of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches" (Mt.13:22). The conclusion to be drawn is that the false teachers are responsible for the new convert being choked by these things. Mk.4:19 says that these lusts enter into the convert's heart. Therefore the thorns must influence the person's thinking, so that he follows after these things until "he becometh unfruitful". The

Greek for "choked" is from a root meaning 'association, companionship'. Marshall's Interlinear renders the Greek text of Lk.8:7 in keeping with this idea: "Growing up with the thorns choked it". Thus it is through close association with the thorn element already in the ecclesia, that the new convert who enters it is corrupted. We each have to ask 'What type of ground are we as an ecclesia? Do I have thorn elements to me...?'

"Choked" implies something ongoing, a process. This is further proof that the sower parable is not concerning any one-off incident of preaching, but speaks of the on-going response to the word in the heart of the believer. In practice, we can each have 'thorny' elements within us personally, not least through failing to appreciate the great influence which our example has over new converts. Subconscious pressure to take a high flying job, the careless use of alcohol, the display of wealth in the name of spirituality, all these are expression of thorn activity. There are no shortage of examples of believers in high pressure jobs, saddled with hefty mortgage payments and demanding wives, whose attendance at Bible class slips, whose personal study of the word slips into once a week, then just to knock out a Bible class, then just a dive into a commentary when an address comes up. The word is choked, "and he becometh unfruitful", partly due to the subtle pressure of others in the ecclesia upon him. The same slippery slope could be outlined for sisters, indeed for all of us in the various stages of life. We can never underestimate the influence of each other upon our response to the word.

The word becoming unfruitful in Mt.13:22 is matched by it yielding "no fruit" (Mk.4:7) and no fruit being perfected in Lk.8:14. The conclusion from this is that spiritual fruit which is developed but does not remain is not really fruit at all. There is the constant temptation for us to recognize just a bit of apparent 'growth' within us, and feel satisfied with it- rather than taking on board the concept of the word having a fulness of effect upon every part of our lives. Given the lesson of the thorns, there is no doubt that one must watch their friends even within the ecclesia. "Thorns and snares are in the way of the forward: he that doth keep (the Hebrew for "keep" is often used in Proverbs about keeping the word) his soul shall be far from them" (Prov.22:5). The language of thorns must connect with the curse upon Eden; the ecclesia, the paradise of God, must always have its thorns in order to spiritually exercise Adam, the spiritual gardener. As our brother's keeper, we need to be aware that after conversion, a whole gamut of new temptations face the convert. *After* he has heard the word, he is choked with the cares, riches and pleasures (Lk.8:14). Yet these things existed before he heard the word; the point is that they became new temptations after his response to the word. A concerted effort to understand, with Biblical guidance, the pressures upon new converts might help save a few more of the many which are being lost.

The Good Ground

The word/ seed which fell into good ground produced fruit. Thus connects with Jn.15:5,7, which says that the branches of the vine bring forth fruit through the word abiding in them. Likewise the good ground keeps the word and continually brings forth fruit (Lk.8:15). It is common for us to learn something from the word, apply it for a few days, and then forget it. Yet surely the implication is that if our hearts are truly open to the word, it will have permanent effects upon us, if the word abides in us. For this reason it is necessary to pray at least daily for our minds to be good ground for the word, and to retain what we already comprehend. Those on the good ground who hear and understand in Mt.13:23 are described as those who hear and keep the word (Lk.8:16). True understanding of the word's teaching is therefore related to an ongoing practical application of it. We may read a human book and understand it at the moment of reading; understanding God's word is quite a different concept. Truly understanding it means keeping it in our heart and therefore in our lives.

The seed fell on good ground, "sprang up, and bare fruit"; indeed, it kept on bearing fruit (Lk.8:8,15). The plant being sown was therefore a repeating crop. True response to the word will lead to wave after wave of spiritual progression. Again, we see that the sower parable is describing an ongoing response to the word- it keeps on being sown by the believer keeping the word, and fruit is continuously brought forth. Mk.4:8 adds the significant detail that it was the *fruit* that the plant yielded which "sprung up and increased". The picture is of a plant bringing forth seeds which themselves germinate into separate plants and bear fruit. This can be interpreted in two ways:

1) True spiritual development in our lives is a cumulative upward spiral; successfully developing spiritual fruit leads to developing yet more.

2) The new plants which come out of our fruit refer to our converts, both from the world and those within the ecclesia whom we help to yield spiritual fruit. There is another link here with the parable of the vine bearing fruit: "I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain" (Jn.15:8,16). This connects with Christ's command to them to go into the world preaching the Gospel and thereby making converts. In this sense our spiritual fruiting is partly through our bringing others to glorify God through the development of a God-like character. It is in this context of using the word for preaching and personal spiritual development that we receive the glorious encouragement "that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he (will) give it you" (Jn.15:7,16).

Every believer who truly strives to bring forth fruit to God's glory, both in preaching to others and in personal character development, will find this promise constantly true.